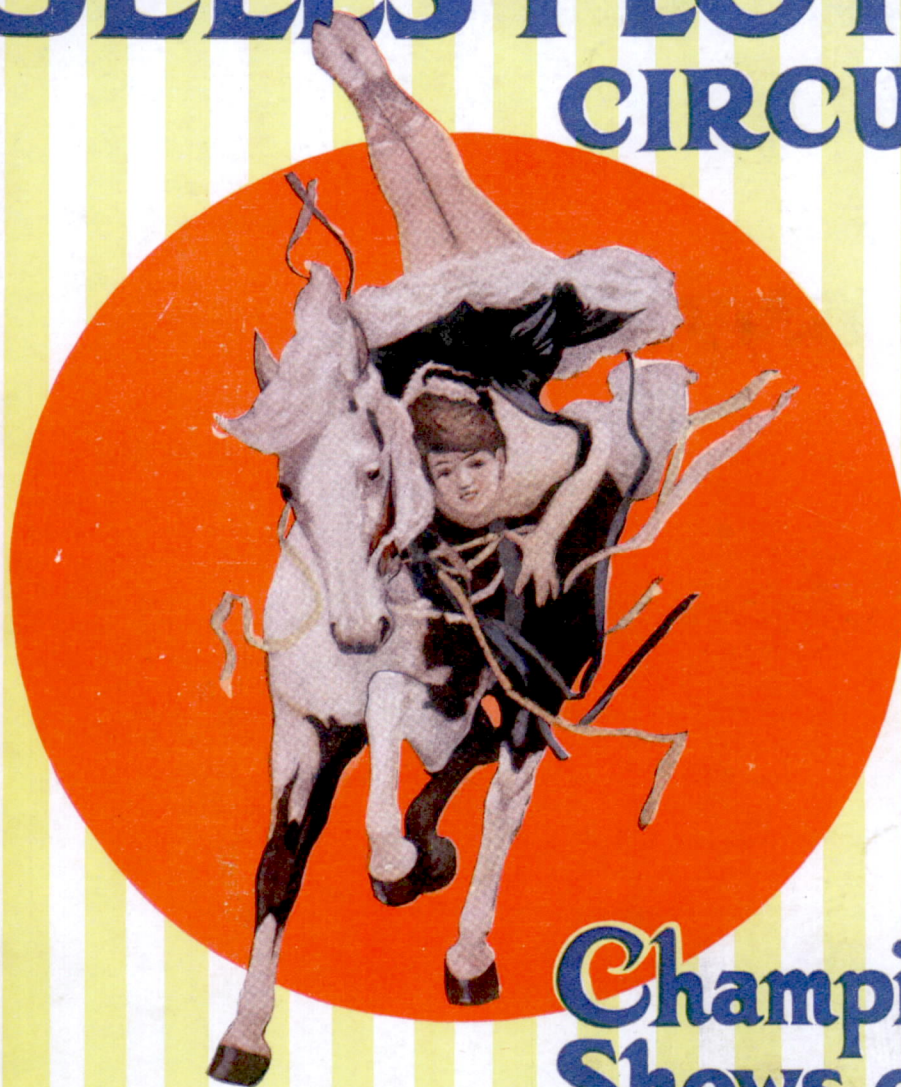


BANDWAGON

July-August 2012 • Volume 56 Number 4

SELLS-FLOTO CIRCUS



Champion
Shows of
the World

PROGRAM
and STORY BOOK

10
CENTS

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BANDWAGON

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, Inc.

July-August 2012 • Volume 56, Number 4
Fred D. Pfening III ——— **Editor and Publisher**

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Officers: President: Judith L. Griffin <circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com> 519 N. Union Street, Appleton, WI 54911; Vice President: Bruce Hawley <bhawley@optonline.net> 91 Winton Place, Stratford, CT 06614; Secretary-Treasurer: Robert Cline <fivetiger@shtc.net> 2707 Zoar Road, Cheraw, SC 29520.

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New Members

Ramon Vasquez #4783
Circo Hermanos Vasquez
700 Vazquez Lane
Donna, TX 78537-4549

Jim Fogarty #4784
9 William Street
Cambridge Park, NSW, 2747 Australia

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Thanks

A number of people helped in completing this issue. Thanks to Steve Gossard, Paul Gutheil, David Jacobson, Janet Pfening, John Polacsek, and M. Lane Talburt. John and Mardi Wells are responsible for the inventive layout and graphics.

The Cover

The 1916 Sells-Floto Circus, whose program cover graces ours, was a great show, moving on forty-two railroad cars, and presenting a powerhouse performance. Headquartered in Denver, it was owned by Harry H. Tammen and Frederick G. Bonfils, publishers of *The Denver Post*. The circus was Tammen's baby; Bonfils never took more than a cursory interest in it. The irrepressible Tammen was a constant irritant to the Ringlings, with whom he was often engaged in litigation, newspaper wars and billing battles. No matter how incendiary, his letters to the Ringlings always closed with the words, "with love and good cheer."

After a late-April opening in Wichita, Kansas, the troupe headed east, going as far as Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It then doubled back, eventually reaching the Pacific Coast where it spent five weeks in September

and October. Stands in Arizona and Texas followed before the mid-November closing. The show played a number of big cities: Louisville, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Antonio among them.

Jess Willard and Frank Gotch were the two features. Willard became boxing's Heavyweight Champion in April, 1915 after besting the African-American Jack Johnson in a contest so racially-charged that it had to be held outside the United States. Willard was introduced in the Sells-Floto performance as "the greatest cowboy of the modern times" during a Wild West display.

Boxing's popularity being much greater then, Willard was regarded as a sports hero equal to Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson or Jim Thorpe. After the Floto season ended, he bought equipment from the 101 Ranch to take out the Buffalo Bill-Jess Willard Wild West in 1917. It toured but that season. After that he returned to boxing, having a long and happy life after being annihilated by Jack Dempsey in a 1919 bout. He died in 1968.

Gotch had been wrestling's Heavyweight Champion from 1908 to 1913, an era in which matches were legitimately contested. His battles with Georg Hackenschmidt, the Russian Lion, captured the public's imagination as much as the Ali-Frazier fights of the 1970s. Like Willard, he was announced during the Floto performance where he was called "the man who has defeated the universe."

He challenged all comers in the show's concert, offering \$250 to anyone who could stay in the ring with him for fifteen minutes. The prize, it was reported, was never claimed. Gotch was a bust, however; leaving the show in mid-July after breaking his ankle. He passed away late in 1917.

The big show was terrific, headlined by Rosa Rosaland, the only woman besides May Wirth and Zefta Loyal to perform a consistent horse to horse somersault. Other sawdust luminaries included Lucia Zora with exotic cats and elephants; Rhoda Royal with his statue horses; Gene and Mary Enos in their perch pole act; Dan Derragh in his equestrian routine, the Homer Hobson riders; Devlin's Zouves; and Jupiter, the "auto hurdling horse."

Fourteen elephants were carried, including Little Miracle who was born two weeks before the season began. The clowning was strong with a number of production numbers. Gene Fowler wrote that Tammen loved clowns, hiring and keeping good ones by maintaining

an excellent cookhouse. The program featured many Wild West acts, including a stage coach attack by Indians and a demonstration of the pony express. The performance ended with the traditional hippodrome races. Karl King and his charges provided the music.

Tammen's health was poor for much of the season, which probably explains why the enterprise was offered for sale in December. Nothing came of it, and the two newspapermen continued to own Sells-Floto until it was sold to the American Circus Corporation after the 1920 season.

This booklet is 36 pages, and measures 6¾" x 10". Unlike most magazine-style programs of the time, it contained no insert that carried a listing of the acts along with advertising from a limited geographical area. All the advertising was national, most of it promoting western railroads and Denver businesses. A form to subscribe to the *Denver Post* was included.

Original in Pfening Archives. Fred D. Pfening

2013 Convention

The annual Circus Historical Society convention will be held in Peru, Indiana from July 17 to 20. A full schedule is planned. A tour of the Paul Kelly Farm outside Peru was originally on the agenda, but it had to be cancelled when Dorothy Kelly, who had graciously agreed to allow the CHS to visit the location, died at the age of 100 in December.

The conference begins with registration on Wednesday July 17, from 2:00-6:00 P.M. at the Best Western City Inn in Peru. Members wishing to exhibit or sell circus memorabilia should contact Secretary-Treasurer Robert Cline as a limited number of tables are available at no charge at the hotel.

The following day is devoted to historical presentations in the auditorium of a community college. Dick Moore begins the session with a report on circus lantern slides. Lane Talburt follows with a video about African-Americans on circuses. Charles Conrad then makes a presentation on circus music. A luncheon buffet follows. The matinee includes Eileen Rosenstel giving a paper on "Those Bodacious Beauties," Sarah Chapman relating her life in the circus, and Steve Gossard sharing his expertise on flying acts.

The always-popular CHS auction is the evening's feature. In past years, many rare

pieces of circus ephemera have gone on the block, including animal booklets, couriers, programs and letterheads. Iconic items such as Strobridge posters and Kelty photographs have also made appearances.

On July 19 members visit the International Circus Hall of Fame, located on the sacred ground that was once the winter quarters of the American Circus Corporation. In the morning members have time to tour the site before a concert by a 60-piece circus band led by Charles Conrad. After lunch, Mark Beauchamp, a Terrell Jacobs impersonator, channels the Lion King, after which David Carlyon discusses clowns. A catered lunch will be followed by a performance of the Hall of Fame Circus. That night conventioners enjoy a performance of the Peru Amateur Circus, which is remarkably professional.

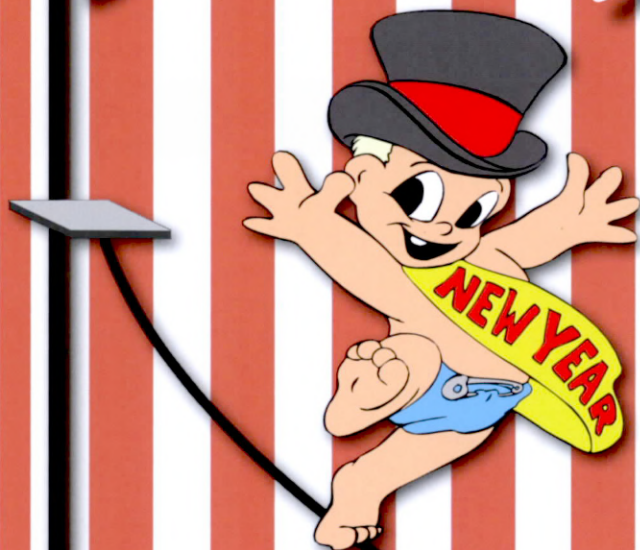
The meeting's last day is in downtown Peru. It begins with the Circus City Festival Parade. Bleacher seats have been procured to assure a comfortable, convivial experience. That afternoon attendees assemble at the Miami County Museum to view its new circus exhibit. Many artifacts and memorabilia that have been in storage are on display. The convention concludes that evening with the Circus Hall of Fame annual induction ceremony and banquet.

The Best Western Circus City Inn is convention headquarters. A block of forty rooms has been set aside for the CHS at \$85 a night, which includes a continental breakfast. Reservations can be made by calling 765-473-8800. It is suggested that those planning to attend make reservations as soon as possible because of the limited availability of rooms. Across the street from the Best Western is a no-frills Knights Inn, which has a rate of \$49 per night. While it would not reserve a block of rooms for CHS, it currently has space. Knights Inn reservations can be made by calling 800-843-5644. There are restaurants near the motels and on the way into Peru.

The agenda is not complete and doubtless other events will be incorporated into the program. The cost of convention registration has yet to be determined, but indications point to a reasonable fee.

Starting Monday July 15 and continuing through July 17, early-arriving members may join convention chairman John Polacsek in organizing circus producer George Hubler's papers at the Circus Hall of Fame. Those interested should contact Polacsek at <artistofdetroit@aol.com> for details.

Seasons Greetings

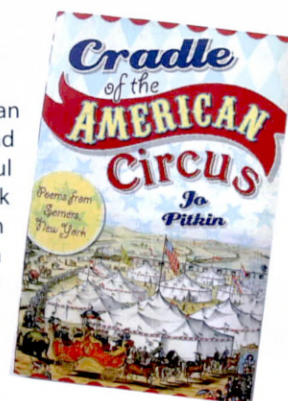


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A. W. Stencell, past president of the Circus Historical Society



"... In her new book..., Pitkin intersperses her evocative poetry with old pictures, advertisements, and other artifacts as well as explanatory essays by regional historians...a meditation on history and show business, the book is at times funny, sad, serious — but always entertaining."

— Ian Crovisier, Hudson Valley Magazine, December 2012

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— Chronogram-Magazine of Arts, Culture, Spirit, December 2012

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and friends, and wish everyone a
wonderful 2013

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From the
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...everyone at
Kelly Miller Circus



BEST WISHES FOR THE HOLIDAYS!



David Rawls

An Interview

by Lane Talburt

Go out with a known title—and plenty of advance. Those were 29-year-old David Rawls' key take-home lesson from his maiden attempt with his father to field a circus in 1977.

Show biz insider Billy Barton cautioned in his January 3, 1977 column in *Circus Report*, "Harry and David Rawls' new

rep-tenter is named 'The Great American Chautauqua' . . . A rep show, in this day and age, is a nostalgic piece, and consequently a very brave adventure. We wish them luck."

In retrospect, the Rawls' venture out of Hugo, Oklahoma was preordained to fail—it was out less than three months, the semi-retired circus owner said. The small canvas show, an unusual combination of circus acts and theatrical skits, suffered not only from lack of name recognition but also poor advance.

This was not the first Rawls family outing with an ill-fated show; the troupe, consisting of mother and father and eight siblings, David being the oldest, had followed Obert Miller on his short-lived *Fairyland Circus* in 1962.

Determined not to repeat mistakes of the past, Rawls spent five years mastering concessions on Acme Circus Corporation shows, learned the ins and outs of phone rooms under promoter Jim Nordmark, then joined Dory Miller to manage concessions on Carson and Barnes Circus from 1978 to 1983.

Despite Miller's misgivings, Rawls got the veteran show owner to lend him the Al G. Kelly and Miller Bros. Circus title—moribund since 1968. With Miller and Jess Jessen, Carson and Barnes general agent, as partners, Rawls launched his own three-ring circus in the spring of 1984. Kelly Miller was routed mostly into towns too small for its sister Carson and Barnes to play. It was a very successful strategy, one which proved more profitable when Rawls went out with a new big top and a single ring in 1995.

At the time he sold Kelly Miller to John Ringling North II in early 2007, Rawls said he never had a losing season. Nor had a Kelly Miller big top suffered a single blow down during almost a quarter century under David's management. Rawls and wife Carol raised two children—Sasha and Kelly—on the road. The couple divorced during the first decade of the 2000s. David later remarried. His wife Brenda is a bookkeeper in the Kelly Miller winter quarters in Hugo. In 2012 he emerged from the sidelines long enough to be a consultant to Barbara Byrd on Carson and Barnes routing and other operational matters.

During his stewardship at Kelly Miller, Rawls was an effective advocate on behalf of the American circus industry. In 2000 he testified on Capital Hill against proposed federal legislation which would have banned the use of elephants in performance and for rides. The bill never made it out of committee. Rawls also served his adopted hometown as mayor in the mid-1990s and in the mid-2010s as city manager.

A hands-on owner, Rawls was equally comfortable repairing a diesel engine in the backyard to switching to a tux to work the three Kelly Miller elephants under the big top. He also maintained a loyal

following of key employees and local sponsors, often showing to packed houses as the show played towns in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic and upper New York State. The circus also toured Canada in even-numbered years from 1984 through the 1998 season.

The ex-Marine also had to deal with the usual assortment of characters and their backyard escapades, including animal trainer Eddie Steeples, whose clash with a Russian bear trainer over Steeples' beautiful partner ended in jail time for Eddie and hospitalization for the Russian.

Rawls spent two hours answering Lane Talburt's questions at the Hugo Public Library on September 25, 2012. The following is an edited version of that interview. Thanks to John Polacsek for his valuable assistance in providing additional information on key Kelly Miller dates and routing.



Kelly Miller midway at Onsted, Michigan July 4, 1985. Clarence Hastings Photo.

Q: When did you take over the Kelly Miller title, and under what circumstance?

Rawls: That's a pretty long story, Lane. I had been with D. R. [Miller] for six years [1978-1983], ran the concessions on his show. And D. R. and I gee and hawed pretty well. We liked a lot of the same things about show business. I liked the logistics: the up and down, the moving, solving problems—much the same as he did. I never met a man in my life who enjoyed or was more enthusiastic about the circus business than D. R. Miller. The man could sit and watch the performance, day in and day out. He thrived on it; he didn't think about much else except the circus business. And he was an enigma to me in that regard because I've always enjoyed and loved the circus business, but I can count on one hand the number of times I've sat and watched my own performance through. I always went in and checked on various aspects of the performance throughout the day or the week, but I never went in and watched the entire show. It just—I couldn't sit still that long. But he did; he was very enthusiastic about it. And the guy was just phenomenal. I mean, we would go way out of our way to see any show. He was very interested in other people and how they did things and what went on. And even though I grew up here and he knew me as a child, I worked for his father, Obert, when I was a kid. He really didn't know much about me. He was interested in hiring me because he'd heard I'd been on the Beatty show. He admired the Beatty show quite a bit. And he said, "That's a real circus." And what was phenomenal, that was coming from a man who was moving what was probably one of the best equipped, well stocked with animals circuses in the country. But he really had an admiration for the Beatty show,

and he told me as much. And I was fascinated by his take on that, because he had as much circus as anybody in the country. And the guy was a phenomenon. I mean, before I worked for him, I knew of the innovations, the things that they had done. At one time every major flying act on every major circus in this country was brought to this country by D. R. Miller. That's Big Apple, Ringling, the Beatty show. All the flying acts in the country he brought in. And so he was an innovator in that regard. Tremendous ability to put together a pleasing, entertaining, fast-paced show. Never would have an intermission because he didn't want the pace of the show to stop, from beginning to end.

Q: Was he a pioneer in bringing acts from Mexico and South America to the U.S.?

Rawls: I'd say yes, yeah. It was something they were involved with early, early on. And Tino Gaona originally came here for Kelly Miller, the old Kelly Miller Circus. He brought them in the country. And they went from here to other shows and ended up staying. A great deal of—many of the flying acts—a great many of the acts he brought into the country. They were so good, he went to Mexico periodically in the wintertime, the off season, to visit circuses and see acts of various people and get to know them and ask them if they'd be interested in working for him.

Q: I remember the old Kelly Miller show—Al G. Kelly-Miller Bros.—in McAlester [Oklahoma] and there was a good number of Mexican acts on that show back in the '50s.

Rawls: Absolutely. I can remember well. I was a kid. I can remember a lot of those acts coming in—Hispanic hand-balancers, trick riders, flying acts.

...

Q: So when were you hired by him and how did that association grow?

Rawls: Ah, it was in the '70s. [1978] I'm trying to remember exactly when—around '74, '75—and I was there six years. No, it might have been a little later, because in 1983, the season of '83, I gave notice that I was going to try to take out my own show. And I'd always been interested in that. That's something I wanted to do.

Letter from David Rawls to Don Marcks, editor of Circus Report, announcing the formation of the Kelly Miller Circus. Pfening Archives.

My father and I took out a show prior, called the Great American Chautauqua [1977]. It was a tent show—theatrical but with a circus theme that ran throughout. But there was singing and dancing, and it was based on the old-time Chautauqua.

Q: Sort of like what the Plunketts used to take out, right?

Rawls: Yeah. Very similar, very similar. And there was a couple of similar—Redpath shows, a couple of Chautauquas that were married to universities, one in Iowa and one in Michigan, I believe, that still exist today. And they don't move like the old time Chautauqua did. In the old days the Redpath shows had seven tents. And they would set them up in seven different towns. And then the acts and actors would move on that circuit, and at the end of the last performance in the first town, they'd move that to the next town. So they had a place to go all the time.

Founded in 1938 by Obert, Kelly and Dores Miller

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CIRCUS CITY, U.S.A.

K.M.
INTERNATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS

Jan. 8, 1984

Mr. Don Marcks;

My name is David Rawls, we visited a little last year when the Carson and Barnes Circus played near Oakland. To make a long story short, we have purchased the John Strong Circus, and we are re-framing the Al G. Kelly-Miller Circus. The show will move on about ten Vehicles and will have an 80' top with two 30's and a 40'. We will also carry a side show- 50' top with two 20's. All of the canvas will be new. The show is owned by Mr. Jess Jessen, D.R. Miller, and myself. I will manage the show on the road.

Kelly-Miller will open April 14, and is Scheduled for a 28 week season. We will carry two elephants and a variety of animals, but we will not be much larger than John's show was last year. I would greatly appreciate an article announcing ~~xxx~~ the shows begining.

Enclosed please find copy for two separte ads I would like to run. I would like to have the ads on two separte pages of your magazine. I am enclosing a check in hopes that it will cover the cost of the ads, as well as my next years subscription to Circus Report.

I thank you very much for your time, and am looking forward to the opportunity of visiting with you again.

Sincerely,
David E. Rawls
David E. Rawls
Mgr. Kelly-Miller Circus

Home of Kelly-Miller Traveling Circus Shrine Club



Zippo the clown with snake making side show bally at Onsted, Michigan, July 4, 1985. Clarence Hastings Photo.

Rawls: Primarily the Midwest. Now there is a Lake Chautauqua, New York, that's named after the Chautauquas. Up around Norman [Oklahoma] as a matter of fact, if you traveled around Norman a little bit, there's Chautauqua Street; there's Chautauqua Park in Norman. A lot of Midwestern towns have Chautauqua parks. Iowa is loaded with them. Now they were big in the Midwest, big in the Midwest. It was a way for—this was prior to television, prior even to the movies.

Q: Now what years did you and your dad take that out?

Rawls: We took that out—Gosh, time's slipping away from me. Early '70s [1977]. We were not successful. Our big mistake was the title. Nobody knew what it was. It was so old and so far in the past, no one had a clue what it was. And when we did attract a big crowd, they were all septuagenarian or sixties anyway, or seventies, eighties. Older people who did know what a Chautauqua was came to the shows. We couldn't attract the young people.

Q: What was the format of your entertainment?

Rawls: It was a play. It started out with my father [Harry Rawls] and my youngest brother [Bill] on stage walking to a fishing hole and passing a poster. And my brother, who was 16 years younger than I am, was playing the grandson. And he said, "Grandfather, what is a shuttlequa?" Looking at the poster. And he said, "Oh, you mean a Chautauqua." And he said, "Well, it's hard to explain." Well truer words were never spoken. It was hard to explain to the public what they were to see. I can tell you that we were well received from the first, the folks that did see the show. We had standing ovations. But we just couldn't get the message across.

Q: What size towns and where did you perform on your route?

Rawls: We played primarily in the Midwest—we did take it to Colorado, played up in the mountains in Colorado. And then closed at—we kept it out until July. And closed in July and brought it home because we just weren't making it. And there was a lot missing from the front end. Probably no truer words were ever spoken, that you just can't put it up and they will come. You have to promote it; you have to have a front end on it; you have to make it work. And we were lacking in that department at the time. I went to work after that and learned the telemarketing business. I learned quite a bit about promotions and the front end.

Q: So these were seven different towns?

Rawls: Yes. They had their tents up in seven different towns; they'd be promoting seven different shows in seven different towns, and they would move the performers; they would move by train.

Q: By what?

Rawls: By train. Yeah, by the standard passenger trains—service that was available in the United States.

Q: So what area of the country did they play in?

Q: Where did you work?

Rawls: I worked for Jimmy Nordmark in telemarketing, who had one of the best phone promotion companies in the country. He had 90 rooms going at one time. And Jimmy was very, very successful. And I knew Jimmy from the old days when he was performing on a trampoline, before he got into the phone business. But Jimmy was a huge success, very successful. And, so I went to him and I said, "Jimmy, I want to learn the phone business. I need to know the phone business." Because I know it was missing in my—the things I knew about show business, that was missing. I didn't know how it all worked. So I want to learn it. And I went to work for Jimmy and I said, "I want to work just like anybody you'd hire off the street, and you teach me. Or put me through your program." He didn't personally teach me, but I went through the program just like anybody else, and I worked several towns for Jimmy. And learned the phone business that way. And I had a lot of business with press agents and people who were involved in press ahead of shows, that are now gone. But I learned a lot from them.

Q: Who were some of them?

Rawls: Oh, I picked anybody's brain who was willing to have their brain picked by a young kid that was interested in the circus business.

Q: And how old were you then, David?

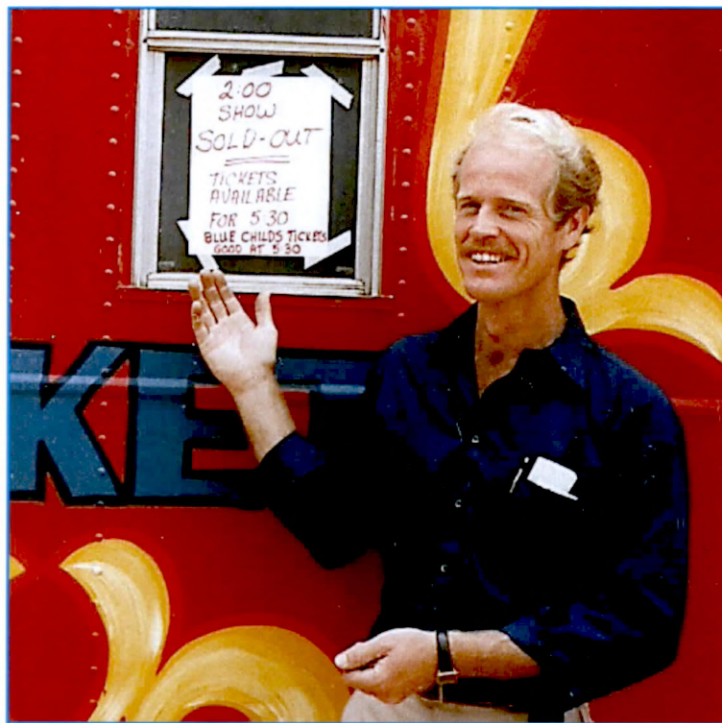
Rawls: This interest started with me when I was 15, 16 years old.

Q: And how old were you when you and your dad took out the Chautauqua?

Rawls: Probably 28, 29, when I got involved with Chautauqua with my dad.

Q: And when were you with the Beatty show?

Rawls: I was on the Beatty show in 1972. I only spent one year with the Beatty show; I spent seven, eight years with the [Acme Circus] Corporation—Beatty and King. And spent eight years down there with [Frank] McClosky and those folks. And after that, we



A happy David Rawls points to sign saying that the matinee performance is sold out at Onsted, Michigan, July 4, 1985. Clarence Hastings Photo.

took out the Chautauqua, and I spent another year trying to recover from taking out the Chautauqua. And then I got into the phone business with Jimmy. And then I went to work for D. R. for six years, running his concessions?

Q: Why were you in concessions? Was that an area that you had been familiar with before?

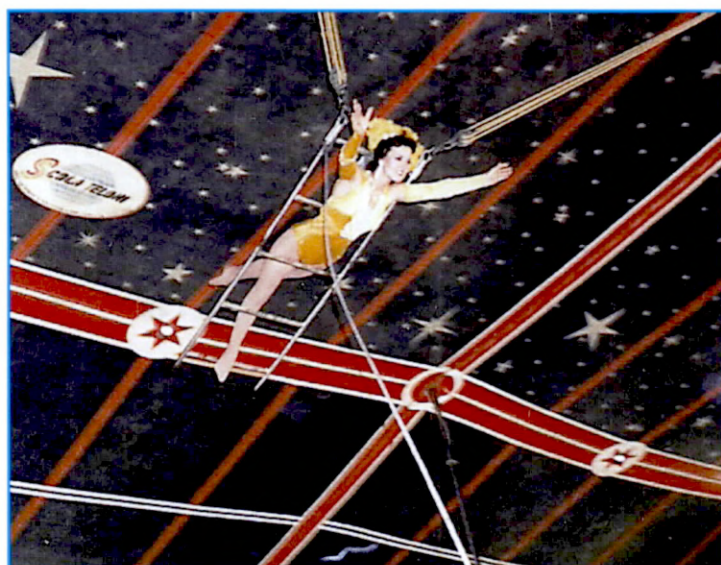
Rawls: I was fascinated with it as a kid. We were all performers when I was a kid. We did a lot of acts—our family did—when I was a kid. And we were on a variety of shows, mostly mud shows. But I was always attracted to the candy butchers; they seemed to be free spirits and always had a little money. And so I would gravitate toward that. And there were usually on a show extra jobs for a show kid. You could pick up paper at night. In the old days pick up pop bottles; you could box candy for the candy pitch, sack peanuts for the peanut pitch. And so all those things I would readily run and try to secure one of those jobs because I loved hanging around the candy butchers, and had a lot of interest in the concession business from that, from those early days. And I'm talking about I was a young kid—seven, eight, nine years old. But I was fascinated by some of the old, gruff candy butchers who really were never that rough, especially as they pretended to be. But I always gravitated toward them. And I liked the concession business. And I liked it because of its fast pace. You had to serve, whatever size show you were on—the Beatty show we could seat almost 3,000 people back then in one performance. So you had to service these 3,000 people in two hours. And it took a crew there. When I was on the Beatty show, I had the concessions over there, and I had eighteen candy butchers working for me. And I was quite young; I was 25 years old. And I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. You know, I thought this was the end—all to be all because to have the stands on the Beatty show was the top tent show in the country. In my mind at that time.

Q: And so what Acme Corporation shows were you on?

Rawls: King and Beatty. I never was on Sells & Gray, although I



Stock Superintendent Jay Evans getting ready for spec at Onsted, Michigan, July 4, 1985. Clarence Hastings Photo.



Kelly Miller aerialist Amy Muller at Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 27 and 28, 1986. Clarence Hastings Photo.

was very familiar with people on Sells & Gray—Willie Storey was the manager for many years over there. And I knew Willie and his wife and daughter.

Q: And who was the GM at the time when you worked on the Beatty and King shows?

Rawls: King show, when I first went there, Bob Couls was the manager. My father later managed the show for Mr. McClosky. And on the Beatty show Johnny Pugh was the general manager, and there was an assistant manager—Bob Grey I believe his name was—who was a band member. But Johnny was the manager. And that show had such a structure. It was structured more like the Ringling show than anything I had ever been around.

Q: And did you like that?

Rawls: No. It was a little too structured. I was used to interacting with anybody on the show, everybody on the show. And that was very structured over there. Edna Antes was in the office; Arnold Maley was in the office. Bob Soule was the head ticket-seller; Tommy Clarke had the prop department. It was very structured and departmentalized. And you really didn't know—there wasn't a lot of socialization between front yard people and backyard people on that show. It just was that—it's the way it was.

Q: Now I'm getting a little ahead of myself. You grew up on shows that played small-town America.

Rawls: Absolutely.

Q: Tell me about your—I mean we could spend hours and hours talking about your dad and mom and the different shows they worked with. But when were you born and where? And give me a little of your upbringing with your family.

Rawls: I was born in 1948 in Lebanon, Missouri. Traveled with a variety of shows when I was a kid. Capt. Eddie Kuhn, the Ayres & K. Davies Circus . . . Famous Cole—Herb Walter's circus . . . several shows, some I don't even remember. There was Ayres-Davis, and there was the Kelly Morris Circus, which Bill Morris owned, he and his wife. I spent time there, and I remember that quite well. But we were on a variety of shows. At one point traveled all winter. I can remember Christmas in Georgia on a circus and eating in the cookhouse. And it . . . it was quite the experience.

Q: What was that like? I know it was probably the only life you ever knew, wasn't it?

Rawls: To a degree. My grandfather, my mother's father, had a little 45-acre patch of rocks in Missouri in the Ozarks that he bought right at the end of the Depression. And he wanted a place to call home. Well, it was home, but it was a one-room tarpaper shack, more or less, with a cistern and outdoor plumbing and a wood stove. I can recall that quite well. And that's where I started school—first year of school.

Q: Was that at Lebanon?

Rawls: No, that was at Macks Creek. No, I was born in the hospital in Lebanon, but we lived way out at Macks Creek, which was quite a ways. Macks Creek was famous because it was a speed trap at one time in Missouri. But it's not far from Springfield and that area that's grown. Lake of the Ozarks is now where Camdenton used to be, and that's where I went to school the first year. I mean, Camdenton is still there, but now there's Lake of the Ozarks, which was just a river at the time. Those days in my early childhood I remember fondly. My Grandpa Willie was around us quite a bit. My Grandmother Lucile, on my mother's side, Willie on my father's side. They were around us quite a bit and had a lot of influence on me, especially my Grandpa Willie.

Q: How did he influence you?

Rawls: He just. . . he treated. . . I come from a large family, a lot of kids and not a lot of time in the day, you know, to sit down and have chit-chats with your mother and father. My Grandpa Willie always seemed to have a little time. And I would ask him those poignant questions that a six-year or seven-year-old would have. I can recall asking him one time in Ohio when we were down in the Ohio River Valley, I think it was Steubenville, I was just a boy at the time. I asked him, "Grandpa, how come we're doing such good business today?" And his answers were always a little short and curt, but he said, "Smokestacks, child. You've got to have smokestacks [laughs]." You have to go where the jobs are. So another thing that

I can remember my grandfather telling me was "A fast nickel is better than a slow dime." So, don't be greedy, and, you know, it's better to have more business than to overcharge and have less.

Q: As I recall, you performed a number of acts, didn't you?

Rawls: Yes. As I grew up, my father was always in the Western shows, the after-shows concert, when I was a kid. And I grew up wanting to be a cowboy. And I learned at an early age how to ride and spin ropes and crack whips. And I was performing in the after-show concert



Aerialists Chris and Ron Pace pose for snapshot at Ann Arbor, 1986. Clarence Hastings Photo.



One of the nicely painted Kelly Miller semitrailers at Ann Arbor, 1986. Clarence Hastings Photo.

and riding in the spec at seven.

Q: What show would that have been on?

Rawls: Famous Cole. They had an after-show concert.

Q: Now was this show out of Hugo?

Rawls: Yes, Herb Walters owned it; he came out of Kansas, I believe. But he actually owned the show—he and his wife, Helen. And it was rather unique; it was an unusual show. And now I'm going back quite a ways when things were different. But he had an after-show concert and a sideshow with a colored band and some dancers. And we also had the Wild West concert on the show. But at that time most shows of any size had a Wild West concert. My father was a trick rider and a Western performer—and that's primarily what he did, until they took it all away and stopped having a Wild West concert. But as I grew up, I said, "That's what I want to do; I want to be like my dad." And so he taught me all he knew about horses and taught me how to ride and spin ropes and crack whips. And I can actually still do that to this day, not as well as I used to [laughs], but I can still do it to this day. But my brother and I did a trampoline act together for many years. And also did rolling globes, learned how to juggle. My sisters—we did every—practically every act you could think of. And my mother [Mary] was a good wire walker. And she did the neck loop, ladder. In those days all the girls did web or ladder, and every kid on the show knew how to swing a ladder or spin a web.

Q: But your mother was quite a performer, wasn't she?

Rawls: Yes.

Q: And the last time I saw them was at the circus diner here a few years ago. In fact, it might have been when I came in for D. R.'s funeral.

Rawls: That's been a while back.

Q: That was in 1999.

Rawls: My father passed away five years ago. My mother is still living; she lives next door to me. Still spry, and we sit and have conversations, just like we're having now, many times at the kitchen table.

Q: So what would you say was your first good break in the circus business?

Rawls: Aw, I've had so many good breaks; I've been so lucky in my lifetime to be able to do what I wanted to do and, to some degree, achieve it. But I had a lot of great opportunities. I think running the concessions on the Beatty show was a great opportunity because it gave me a chance at 25 years old to get to know Frank McClosky and a lot of people that I admired and knew their names and knew who they were, but I had never met or interacted with at all. And, to be honest, in the time I worked for Mr. McClosky, I didn't have a lot of interaction. We would discuss the concession operation, and he told me what he thought, and that was about the extent of it. Mr. McClosky wasn't there a lot.



Punch and Judy side show banner at Ann Arbor, 1986. Clarence Hastings Photo.

Q: He was pretty much a meat-and-potatoes type of guy, wasn't he?

Rawls: Oh, absolutely. He loved professional football and liked to watch it and kept up with it. He kept track of his shows; he would visit the shows periodically—each one of them. But primarily the years I knew him or was aware of Mr. McClosky, he stayed in Orlando and would venture out to see his shows once or twice a year. He wasn't a permanent fixture. He let the managers run the show.

Q: So who was the manager on the Beatty show?

Rawls: At that time it was Johnny, Johnny Pugh.

Q: So, how did the tie-in with D. R. come about?

Rawls: Well, I'd known D. R. since I was a kid. I grew up here, went to schools with Barbara [Miller Byrd, daughter of D. R. and Isla Miller]. Went to college at OU [University of Oklahoma]—Barbara and I were at OU at the same time. And I was very well aware of the family. There was a lot of camaraderie and association with show people here in this town. We had a Showman's Club at the Elks Club out here in this town, and periodically they would have parties at D. R.'s house. Kelly [Miller—Dory's brother] built the house, but they had a great basement, and there would be parties for show people at the house. And so you had the opportunity. Of course, I was a kid, you know, and so in those days kids were seen and not heard. But I was well aware of the people about me that—I saw a lot of them in action and I had a lot of interest in the circus business at a young age. My brothers and sisters used to kid me—called me "Mister Circus" because I was always interested in staying up and helping the mechanics and the various aspects of show business that they didn't have an interest in. I mean, they did their acts and, and they were interested in doing that. But I wanted to know why there was a...oh, uh...Floyd King, you know, why does he route his shows the way he routes them? Why does he go where he goes? I had heard stories about Floyd, and he was a whiz, especially on the East Coast, about getting his show. I heard a story one time that they [circuses] would all leave Florida at the same time—all those shows that wintered down in Florida, they'd leave Florida at the same time. He would cut west and go to the Appalachian Mountains and up the Appalachians and be in Pennsylvania and Northern Maryland before the rest of them. And he did good business all the way. He wasn't fighting the I-95

corridor with everybody else and playing towns that everybody else played. He would get off the beaten track. And I was always interested. Why did he do that? You know; how did he know to do that? And there was a guy over here named Art Miller that booked shows, back in the days when the agent left town three weeks ahead of the circus and kept it booked. And I was always interested. Why did they go where they go when they go. A lot of people don't realize that these tall-grass circuses or the mud shows, as you call them, followed the crops. They would go south into Texas in the early part of the year and then follow the wheat harvest north because it generated money. In each of the towns where the wheat harvest had been there was some money available. And then when they reached the Canadian border, they turned around and followed the cotton harvest back because almost everybody was involved in the harvest. Kids could get jobs tasseling corn or helping drive trucks and haul the grain to the elevator, and things like that. It generated an economy, a brief economy, in all the towns. And then we got back south and there was a cotton crop that was being harvested, and a lot of people got involved, and they had extra work, extra money to spend on the show. The same thing with Southern Louisiana when they harvested the cane, when they harvested that sugar cane. If you were following sugar cane trailers, you were at the right time at the right place. And that was always interesting to me when I was a teenager.

Q: So you were always interested in the operations. Of course, you always performed, but your interest was in the operations.

Rawls: Oh yeah. I was interested in the concessions; I was interested in the mechanics. I begged my parents to let me stay up at night with the mechanics on the show if they had to change an engine out. And I would just hand them wrenches. I'd be a go-fer; I'd get them coffee. I'd do whatever, and I learned, at that time, a lot about repairing engines or transmissions or whatever the case may be.



Kelly Miller ticket wagon at Chelsea, Michigan, June 29 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.

Q: The first time I met you—I believe it was on the Kelly Miller lot in Waterloo, Illinois, you were under one of the trucks. You had gone over to the next town to buy some parts and you came back and installed them yourself. But you were on the ground, working on the engine.

Rawls: I've done that many times. And I don't recall the particular instance that you're talking about, Lane. And I kind of learned as I went. It wasn't anything for me to buy a Chilton book—a how-to mechanics book—to explore a problem that I wasn't familiar with.

Q: Well, did you finish school in Hugo?

Rawls: Yes.

Q: What year did you graduate?

Rawls: '66.

Q: And did you go to college from there?

Rawls: Yes. I went to OU for a year and then I joined the Marine Corps for three years. Then I came back and went to college.

Q: Were you in Vietnam?

Rawls: Yes.

Q: What years?

Rawls: I went over in December '67 and came home in January '69.

Q: So that was quite an interruption in your circus career.

Rawls: Oh yeah, yeah. Now the Marine Corps, they don't have a lot of extra time when you're in the service. So yeah, my time was spent—I did occasionally visit shows when I could get a pass, but when I came back from Vietnam, I requested three East Coast duty stations so I could see the shows that I was familiar with. And they stationed me in Camp Pendleton, California [laughs]. If I had known how it worked, I would have requested all West Coast duty stations and they would have put me on the East Coast [laughs].

Q: But you came back in '69. And what did you do at that point?

Rawls: I was still in the Marine Corps; I had another year to go. And in 1970 I was out of the Marine Corps and I went back to college. And a couple years after that I took the concessions on Jimmy Cole's winter show up in New York, Pennsylvania—ran that, and Jimmy got sick, and I actually ran his show for a couple of seasons. And Jimmy's wife got sick, actually.



Marquee at Chelsea, Michigan 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.

We taught him how to juggle. Whenever we got close to Olean, we knew we were going to see the Martin family because they'd bring him out. He was fascinated with the circus business.

Q: I'm hoping to interview him in the fall, maybe at Monticello [New York] or some place close to there. So you hooked up with D. R. in what year then?

Rawls: About 1977.

Q: And what brought that about?

Rawls: Uh . . . he was looking for a concession manager. And I came home for Christmas. I was working for Jimmy Nordmark. I was in Columbus, Ohio, running a room for Jimmy Nordmark, and I came home for Christmas and was here in town, and my father happened to say they were looking for a concession manager on Carson and Barnes. And I had never been on Carson and Barnes before, knew the family and all, knew many people that worked there. But . . . so I gave a call out to what we call "the big house" and D. R. wasn't there. I talked to Ted Bowman. And he said, "Yeah, we are looking for a concession manager," and so he said, "come on out." I said, "Nah. I'll just buy you lunch. Come on downtown." And we had lunch so that it was just he and I talking. And I said, "Is he [D. R.] serious? Here's what I do and how I'll do it and if he's interested, give me a call." And I went on back to Columbus. And

D. R., I think, was in Florida at the time and visiting people and seeing shows or whatever. And when he got back, he called me. And he said, "I'm interested in making a deal." So we discussed it and he said, "How much time can you give me in winter quarters?" I said I'd have to give Jimmy notice, so two weeks was the most I could promise. He said, "Alright, I'll see you." And opened in March.

Q: Now was Norma Cristiani working with Jimmy Nordmark at that time?



Harry Rawls, David's father, making side show bally with magician and Zippo the Clown at Chelsea, Michigan 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.

Rawls: I'll tell you the truth. I've known Norma since I was a little kid, but I don't know that she was working for Jimmy at that time.

Q: I know that in the '80s she worked booking for Carson and Barnes.

Rawls: And I know that Pete [Cristiani] worked for Hoxie at one point, Hoxie Tucker, in the '70s, yeah. But I don't recall Norma being affiliated with Jimmy Nordmark at that time. I know she was there. She might have done some booking work for him and was contracting. And Norma was very good at contacting; I mean, she's got a background.

Q: She did some work for D. R., as I recall.

Rawls: And she's got a background, Norma. And when you think of the Dailey show and the territory that they covered and her history, I mean she knows this country backward and forward when it comes to show business.

Q: So what was going on at Carson and Barnes at that time? Wasn't it in a five-ring format?

Rawls: Five-ring show. Big show. Lot of people, lot of acts. But it moved like, like the old mud shows. I mean, there wasn't a whole lot of difference. There wasn't the structure that you found on the Beatty show. It wasn't so departmentalized.

Q: Who were some of the people that you worked with?

Rawls: Oh gosh. Okie Carr was there with the elephants and the cats. Of course, I knew Freddy Logan well; he was here previous to that. I'm trying to remember some of the other people.

Q: Did they have a 10-in-1 sideshow?

Rawls: No, that year when I started they didn't. Now he put in a 10-in-1 a couple of times, which were actually carnival 10-in-1s that he had on the show. But it wasn't a good place for a sideshow, an independent sideshow, I'll be honest with you, because of the menagerie setup. D. R. would never hold his doors. He would open them immediately. Because there was no activity outside the doors. It was all within the menagerie—elephant rides, concessions—everything was within the menagerie. So he would open the door immediately, so it wasn't conducive to a sideshow in that aspect.

Q: Did he have a western concert at that point?

Rawls: No. And I don't ever recall seeing a western concert on D. R.'s show. Now I'm sure he had one way back.

Q: Well, on Kelly Miller he had Tim McCoy a couple of years.

Rawls: No. That was Jack Moore. Jack Moore had Tim McCoy. Those



Len "Bubba" Leonard, long-time Kelly Miller front door man, at Chelsea, Michigan 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.

years they had Sky King and they also had Tim McCoy on Carson and Barnes. I was there in '58 and '59 when Tim was there.

Q: When did Kelly Miller become Carson and Barnes with D. R.?

Rawls: 1968 was the last year for Al G. Kelly-Miller. D. R. went out with Ann [Moore]. Actually, Jack had passed away; Jack had died. And Ann had the show out, and remember [Dave] Hoover was here with the cats on the show. And he had a brother, named Hank, who married Wanda, who is Jack Moore's daughter. And they were trying to manage the show at that time. And [Joe] McMahon was here also. And D. R. came over and he ran the concessions. Now D. R. owned part of the show. He had been partners with Jack all through the Carson and Barnes years. And not many people were aware of that at that point. After he passed away, he got involved with the Carson and Barnes show and eventually bought Ann out and concentrated

all his efforts on Carson and Barnes. And the Kelly Miller title lay fallow from '69 until '83. I took it out in the spring of '84. And there was a little skepticism by D. R. about using the title. The primary reason my using the title was a lot of lithos and things still existed at some of the printing companies. I didn't have to have a lot of artwork done for the printing for posters, for tickets, for passes—things like that. It was already there.

Q: Well, did you use the full title.

Rawls: Al G. Kelly-Miller Bros. Circus. I changed it back the third year of operation to just Kelly Miller. It was too confusing for the general public to wrap their head around the "Al G."

Q: When you started Al G. Kelly-Miller in '83-'84, what was the format? And obviously Miller owned part of the show, didn't he, or did you own it?

Rawls: No, no. D. R. and I were partners. And there was a third partner. Jess Jensen. And that came about later. D. R. and I made the deal to go partners and take out the Al G. I had told him at the beginning of the sixth year that I was on the show that I was going to give him notice—this would be my last season, because I'm going to go out and open my own show, one way or the other, by hook or crook. So we talked a lot about my ideas, his ideas. And he didn't think a small show could make money. I said I was interested in a show about the size of the King show: ten-truck circus, 80-foot top. I was very confident that I could run that kind of a show and make money



Chris and Ron Pace about to present their single elephant act, Chelsea, Michigan, 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.

with it. And there was a lot of territory that was wide open. And after that, it became even more territory because King and Sells & Gray went off the road. So there was a lot of small-town territory in the United States for a small tent circus.

Q: So what were the towns that you started out with? I mean, Carson and Barnes wasn't adverse to playing small towns, was it?

Rawls: No, no. He never shied away from playing a small town. Now there were towns too small for Carson and Barnes to play. You got to remember he had as many as 200 people around that show. And a lot of trucks and a lot of equipment. So it took a pretty good-size lot. But we could play—we played Chicago. We played Maryland around Washington, D.C. and Baltimore with Carson and Barnes. I didn't want to be able to play any size town, but I wanted to be able to survive in the small towns. And I could play towns with—I've had great success in towns 1,500, 2,000 people.

Q: So you played Stigler, Oklahoma [for example].

Rawls: Stigler, yeah.

Q: Idabel.

Rawls: Poteau, Idabel, Stigler, Antlers, Hugo. I mean, I would play rural America. And there was a lot of territory that was available and open, and you could book the show. And you weren't competing with everybody else.

Q: How did you stand with that show? What was different from Carson and Barnes?

Rawls: Well, there was some difference. Uh, I knew what they were doing. I used some of it to book Kelly Miller. That first year I didn't start until January 9th. When we actually sat down and put it on paper and we made the deal. And I pushed the opening back to April 14th. That was a late opening for a tent circus. But I pushed it back to April 14th to give myself time to get the show ready to go. I had to get some towns booked in front of me. So that first year was a struggle, and I played 28 weeks, and brought it home in October.

Q: Did you make money?

Rawls: Yes. And that was the other thing. D. R. said, "You won't make money the first year." So did my other partner, Jess Jessen—"You won't make money for a couple of years." And I said, "Well it better make money." So it did. Now, not a lot. It didn't make a lot of money that first year.

Q: What do you attribute that to? Why were you able to make money, I mean, almost all the years, didn't you?

Rawls: Yeah, I never had a losing year, never had a losing year. And I'm not bragging about that, but it's a matter of fact. We've never had a losing year, and we were very successful. I'll be honest with you: good fortune, the right timing,



Chris Pace in her aerial routine, Chelsea, Michigan, 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.



Bob and Dixie Seaton in their hand balancing act on Kelly Miller, Chelsea, Michigan, 1987. Clarence Hastings Photo.

a lot of hard work, good people. I had a lot of good people that worked for me.

Q: And you also were a hands-on show owner, weren't you?

Rawls: Very much. There wasn't much around a show I couldn't do. I don't care whether it was putting a tent up, fixing a truck, working the horses.

Q: Elephants.

Rawls: Working the elephants . . . uh, the concession department, driving a semi. There wasn't much I couldn't do. And that was intentional. I learned all of that starting as a young child, even through my teen-age years. And I pursued the things I didn't know in show business that I wanted to go learn—even though running a phone room was never my idea of a great way to spend your life. But I knew I needed to know it. Everybody was doing it, and it was expected. It's not so much anymore. There's no . . . I never ran—except for Jimmy Nordmark—I never ran a night room on my show; we only did just day phones.

Q: What do you mean?

Rawls: Well, we wouldn't call homes. We would call businesses and ask them to buy children's tickets to support the local sponsor. But Jimmy ran what we called night rooms. And they would call homes and ask you to buy tickets to support a charitable group or sponsor. And they tended to be much larger. It was nothing for Jimmy to have a hundred, a hundred-fifty, two-hundred-fifty-thousand dollar phone promotion in some of the towns they played. And he had 90 rooms going at one time. So the revenue was just tremendous. A lot of the revenue got spent; it cost a lot to do that. But it was a tremendous amount of revenue.

Q: So did you start using phone rooms right off the bat with your show?

Rawls: Yes. Day rooms, day rooms. And I knew how to run a day room because I had gone and learned from Jimmy. Because he had day rooms also, but he concentrated mainly—his concentration was on the night room.

Q: That first year out, what was the mechanics of the circus, and who ran what? I mean you couldn't be everywhere doing everything at once. So who did you lean on that first year to get the show on its feet again?

Rawls: I had a young kid, a Mexican kid. His name was Felipe Tehran, who is now the superintendent on the Big Apple Circus, who worked for me. He worked for me in the concession business when I had concessions. And I gave him the option of working with me, and I told him, "Now we may starve to death, and we may not make any money. You've got a good job here if you want to stay and keep it." And he opted to go with me. And I made him

my tent superintendent, which he didn't know much about. It was a teaching process, but he was dependable. I could tell him to go do something, and he would break his neck to do it, even if he didn't know how. And he worked hard, worked very, very hard. And he was a great deal of help. At that time, my kids were quite young.

Q: And what were their names?

Rawls: Sasha and Kelly. And they were quite young at the time. Kelly was just a baby. As I can recall, Felipe—I can recall Felipe being there. That first year I didn't have an office manager. It was a few weeks into the season I realized that was going to be a big downfall of mine if I didn't do something about it. So I hired Whitey Black. I heard through the grapevine that he had gotten crossways with Gopher Davenport at the time, so I put out the feelers to find out where he was and called him, and Whitey came to work for me. He ran my office. He did a great job.

Q: On the road?

Rawls: On the road.

Q: Who did the advance?

Rawls: The advance . . . I did a lot of it myself. My sister, who was going to college at the time, I hired her during the summer to work for me.

Q: That was who?

Rawls: Kathy. I hired Ayres Davies to work for me some, you know, the Southeast. I had regional agents. And where I didn't have a regional agent, I booked myself. And I would go out and book the towns. But it . . . once the show opened now, I stayed on the show.

Q: Do you recall some of the acts you had that first year?

Rawls: I had the Windlans were over there; they had the sideshow. I had Harry—I can't think of his last name. He and his wife; she had a cradle act, and she did another aerial act. And he put the sideshow up and down for me. And I had . . . gosh . . . John Marone work the elephants. And I believe he had a leash cat act I had that first year—leash leopard act. And I had a tiger in the sideshow. I had a mixture of people that were—I'll be honest with you, hiring people on a first-year operation with an unknown name, I mean, not many people knew who the hell I was. So not many people were willing to risk the season. But I managed to put together a performance, and it changed some that first year.

Q: Did you have a band that first year?

*Kelly Miller
midway at
Cleveland, Ohio
during 1998 CFA
convention. Paul
Gutheil Photo.*

Rawls: Yes, I did. We had a two- or three-piece band. I mean we threw everything together, believe me. There was no equipment or anything. We salvaged everything we could out of the John Strong show, which was at most two trucks and the seats, the primary thing. No generator. I bought a new sideshow top, and I bought a

tent that first year from Italy [a blue 80 round with two 30s and one 40 middles]. It was a struggle, financially, to get and pay for, but it was a life-saver because it made the show look good. It looked better than a hanging rag could be perceived as, to the public.

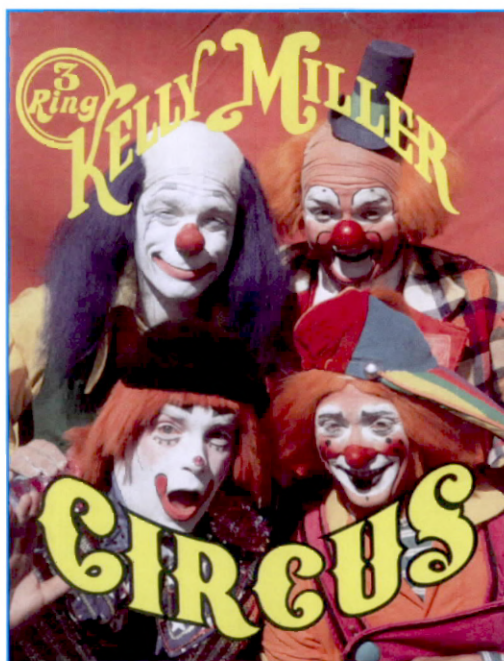
Q: When did [brother] Bobby [Rawls] start . . . ?

Rawls: Painting for me? As soon as I could afford him. Bobby was always a great painter, good painter. He learned as a kid; he had great interest in art, and he was a good artist. And as soon as I knew I could afford him, and he was available. You got to remember he managed for Johnny [Pugh] over on the Beatty show. When Johnny became owner over there, he went to work for Johnny Pugh over there. And for a couple of years he and my brother Chris were managers over there. But when [Bobby] became available and settled down here in Oklahoma, I asked him, and he painted my show every winter.

Q: So, what was your route that first year? What territory did you invade? And did you have any route that you picked up from anybody?

Rawls: No I didn't pick up a route from anybody. I had a primary target that I was interested in that first year. Everyone . . . you've got to remember in the early '80s, the auto industry had gone downhill considerably, and no one had been going extensively into Michigan and Northern Indiana. So that was my primary target that first year. And I played quite a few weeks in Michigan, and I played Northern. . . . And I'll be honest with you, I struggled quite a bit. I had some early success in Arkansas and a few weeks in Northeast Texas towns. But I had some bad days, too. But as I worked my way up to Indiana, as I crossed, um, north of Indianapolis, when I got north of Indianapolis, things started to turn. And I had a good run in

Northern Indiana and I had a good run in Michigan. I skirted around Chicago. I played way out—50 or 60 miles out of Chicago. Went across into Iowa, which was a mistake. By the time I got to Iowa. Of course, I knew Iowa was going to be weak anyway because they're pretty tight.



*Kelly Miller program 1988 program cover.
Pfening Archives.*



Those folks are frugal. And it was what we called in the concession business "brown baggers."

Q: David, as I recall, you didn't have a hard-and-fast end-of-the-season dates, did you?

Rawls: No, I didn't know how far I would be able to go. And booking, believe me, I probably didn't have the season booked until August.

Q: So you came back when that first year?

Rawls: October, I believe around the 28th of October.

Q: That was a pretty long season.

Rawls: Yeah, it was 28 weeks. I stayed out 28 weeks. And that whole first year I ran scared. I'll never forget the elation I had when I'd got to October. The first of October I knew I was going to make it. I had those towns booked, and I was going to bring it back into the house, and I was going to have some money left when I got done.

Q: What were some of the mistakes that you made that first year out in terms of booking jumps and technical stuff?

Rawls: Oh, there were many mistakes. I went—I slid too far back west too late. I shouldn't have been in Kansas and Iowa in the fall of the year, and I learned a lesson from that. Now you've got to bring it home, so you can either long jump home or you play home. And so after that I always played, I played down through Missouri and Southern Illinois, and I didn't venture into Iowa again after that. Played a little Nebraska, off that corner of Illinois and Missouri over there. But I pretty much stayed to the East. And then I expanded my route to the East. And the second or third year, I had always looked at Canada. No one was touring Canada with a tent show at that time. And I started establishing a route in Michigan, a good solid route in Michigan in a good

variety of towns that I could play every other year. And so I decided to make it across Port Huron there going into Ontario. And the first year I did it I only did four weeks. Little scarce due to the economy.

Q: That was sort of the way the Cristianis played it.

Rawls: Yeah, back in the old days. So I ventured across and it was a pretty successful foray. So I went across in August, which is pretty typically a struggle month for any show. And I took it across and went into what they call the tourism part of Ontario, the Lake Country up north of Toronto and up north of London. And I played some of that tourist area. Well, August is typically a tourist month for Canada; they all go on vacation in August, and they go to their cabins, and they go up country. It was beautiful country to play. And it was well received; I got into a great relationship with my sponsors, and they wanted to do it again. And so every other year after that I went to Canada and I extended the tour to six weeks. Six weeks in Canada. And I'd go in mid-July and then come back out the end of August.

Q: Did you come back into the U.S. through New York?

Rawls: No, no. I always came back out Michigan. I never crossed back into New York. At that time I wasn't playing New York. I didn't

play New York until later. And then I played upstate New York, the Adirondacks; I stayed away from the metropolitan areas and I didn't venture toward New York, hardly at all.

Q: I think I saw you in '99 in Illinois—Columbia or some place—and you had been to Canada that season—said Canada was becoming real iffy because of. . .

Rawls: Immigration and animal issues.

Q: OK, and also because the Canadian dollar to the American dollar.

Rawls: Yeah, it was becoming a struggle. I mean it dropped down considerably there. And the Canadians had an upper limit on what they could spend as a family, too. So there was an upper limit on that. And it got into the 70s, 70-something cents on the dollar. The business was good enough, and you were able to overcome that to a degree. And if you take the same six weeks and put them in the States in July, you know, late July and August, it was a consideration. My primary reason for ending my tours in Canada was strictly the immigration policy here in the United States. The acts—the people that I had that had visas, the minute I crossed the Canadian border, they would terminate the visas. So I'd have to reapply to get visas for those people to get back into the United States.

Q: Did many of the acts come from Mexico?

Rawls: I didn't have many Mexican acts, but I had a lot of Mexican help, working help. Yeah, they would terminate their visas the minute I crossed into Canada. So I would have to reapply. Well, they don't work that fast; the government doesn't work that fast. It was very difficult to get visas in six weeks. And a couple of years there I made it by the skin of my teeth, and with a lot of trepidation as well. I didn't want to be stuck on the Canadian side, or my people to be stuck on the Canadian side,

and I couldn't go play dates that I had already booked.

Q: So what year did you end?

Rawls: '98 was the last tour. Yeah, that was the last time I went to Canada. And that was the primary reason; it became difficult. It was the policy of the United States, not the Canadians.

Q: So how many years did you go out with the three-ring format?

Rawls: Well Lane, you ask me that, and I just can't recall [from 1984-1994 seasons]. I had it out for several years. I bought two tents from Italy, three-ring style tents from Italy. And I think the second one I bought I was playing Ann Arbor, and I had the tent delivered to Ann Arbor, Michigan. It happened to be blue and yellow—the color of the Lansing [Ann Arbor] team—Michigan—was blue and yellow, and they all thought I'd bought that tent just to impress them. See, I was playing for the St. Joseph's Hospital System; that was the sponsor. And we put on a gala performance, which we did in a few places, but we had a black tie dinner and dance and tables and chairs and special seating on Friday night, and then Saturday and Sunday we played performances for the general public. And very successful dates for several—many years in a row. But that tent that I bought



Big top interior at Cleveland, 1998. Paul Gutheil Photo.

instead of lacing it strictly side to side on the narrow side, the 80-foot side, I had them put a lace line all the way down the tent. So the two, the round ends came apart in two parts on both sides. And then you could take apart the middle part, half and half. So laying that tent out, that's when it hit me that I could put a tent together with a cupola. All I was missing was the middle. So I started drawing it, and I drew it for a couple of years, picked it apart, pros and cons, and finally I saw the Italian tentmaker over in Italy, and I told him, "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to come over here to see me." So he flew into Dallas. We sat in my house here in town, and I drew that thing for him. He said, "That's not going to work." They were used to building the tower-structure type top, and I wanted a push-pole type top. And I said, "Well, I think it will work." I said, "Can you build it?" He said, "I can build anything." I said, "Well you build this." I said, "I'll make it work." So he did.

Q: That was a four-pole tent, right?

Rawls: Yeah, four-pole tent, push-pole. And it did work. It worked fine.

Q: So what were the factors involved going from three [rings] to one? And the thing is a number of shows—Ward Hall told me about the family that had put out a one-ring show and it went broke. One-ring shows weren't that popular then, were they?

Rawls: Well, I'll tell you the truth, I don't think it has a whole lot to do with the show. There've been a lot of performers who put out shows. Great shows. No front end. They were under the impression, a lot of people that I've known in this business have been in the impression that if you put it up, all you have to do is put it up, and they will come. And that's not true. You've got to promote it; you've got to have a front end on it. You've got to have the right elements to make it work.

Q: What were the reasons in your case?

Rawls: Well, in my case, there were two overriding factors. My primary interest was in being able to present a performance in a different format: better lighting, a higher peak on the tent so that I could do the flying acts and the wheel, things like that, that I hadn't been able to do in the 80-foot top, because it just peaked out too low. In the center of the tent you could have a flying act, but you didn't have enough length.

Q: That was one thing that always hit me about D. R.'s old show, Al G. Kelly-Miller. It was a big tent, but it seemed to me, it seemed to me that the trapeze artist going down, she had to be careful not to scrape her nose in the dirt.

Rawls: [laughs] He had. Well, typically what we called the mud shows, the Midwest shows, had a low-profile structure. They didn't peak out as high as other shows. The seats didn't tend to be as high. You've got to remember the Ringling show under canvas could seat upwards of 14,000 people. The seats were extremely high. The side poles and sidewalls were high. I remember hearing stories about

the guys who caught the stringers wore the pads, because when you dropped those stringers, you couldn't put your hands on the top of it. So you had to lift it up from the bottom and let it down, and the guy who caught the back of the stringers, hauled them out from the truck wore a pad on his shoulder to catch those stringers. They were huge operations, and the structure of them was different. And the seating on the mud shows seemed to be—nine high was the common seating height.

Q: Was that on yours on the three-ring?

Rawls: Nine high.

Q: And what did that do to things when you went to one ring?

Rawls: Well, to tell you the truth, I couldn't afford to change everything at the same time. I changed the tent and then I changed the seating later and went to seat wagons.

Q: So you used jacks and stringers when you started out.

Rawls: I used the jacks and stringers, and I used the old John Strong seats which were nine high also, but they were very low profile. They weren't more than three feet off the ground at the back. They were very low profile seating and very undesirable, but that's what I had and what I used for the first several years.

Q: How many could you seat the first years in that one-ring tent?

Rawls: I could get 1,200 people in it.

Q: That was a good make-or-break figure for the size of towns you played, wasn't it?

Rawls: Oh yeah, and I'll be honest with you. I could get very close to the nut with 600 people for the day; that's two shows. So it was very reasonable that I could, if we had people I could make money. And quite often we did. So it was a . . . And I think that's important, too. If you're going to take out a show, you'd better know what it's going to cost you and how many people



The CFA used the Kelly Miller big top for a church service during its 1998 convention. Paul Gutheil Photo.

you've got to have to make it.

Q: How many people under the three-ring format, how many people did you have compared to one ring?

Rawls: On the show?

Q: On the show?

Rawls: That didn't change. That didn't change much. When I first started, I had a limited amount of people. Couldn't attract them, couldn't afford them, wasn't sure I could pay them. I think when I first opened I had 32 people on the show. We grew to 70. But that didn't change much. I grew to 70 with the three-ring operation, and when I went to one-ring, I still had the same 70 people around.

Q: So it seemed that for a number of years it hovered around the 70-people mark.

Rawls: Well, it wasn't a number that I picked out of a hat. It's what I needed. The number of people that I needed like I wanted to run it. I had the performance that I wanted to have.

Q: And how about equipment, the trucks and that kind of stuff. Did you see any difference in that?

Rawls: No. No difference. No difference.

Q: But did the new tent format, the one that you came up with—

the push pole—did that pose any operational problems in terms of changing the mind-set of the canvas crew from that three-ring format to this one-ring?

Rawls: I discovered a long time ago, Lane, when you make a change, any kind of a change, people resist it. It's human nature. Whether it's the Marine Corps, or wherever it is. When there's a change, there's a certain amount of resistance. The secret to making a change—and I learned this from D. R., it's like getting a truck out of the mud. If you believe it's going to come out and everybody around you believes it's going to come out, it will come out. But if you start believing it's not going to come out—this won't work or that won't work—then you're setting yourself up for failure. You've got to believe it will work and then you've got to implement the patting on the back, a little pushing, a little tugging to implement those changes. Once you do and it's successful and it works, people like it. But they'll usually fight change a little bit.

Q: Did you have any appreciable change in personnel when you went from three rings to one?

Rawls: No. I have to say that I was able in the years that I had the show, I was able to attract and keep a staff that was second to none. I wouldn't trade them with anybody. I had—and they're still there today, a great many of them are still there today with John North. And that's to their credit. They're great people.

Q: You had a number of families that came in with you, didn't you?

Rawls: Over the years, yes. I put together a coalition, the Perez family that I had with me, I depended on them a tremendous amount. They did a great job for me.

Q: They covered all aspects.

Rawls: All aspects, from performance to logistics to concessions—all aspects. They really did. And they adopted my belief, I believe, our belief—my belief—in what type of show we were to have, how we were to treat our public, how we were to move and operate, from dress code to show time I mean, they just . . . we were all one mind.

Q: So during the years you had the show you worked in all kinds of weather. Did you ever have a blow down?

Rawls: It's funny you should ask me that. I don't say it to many people, but in 25 years I never had a blow down. I've had some bad storms, but never had a blow down. And that's not just luck. Every day you put in all the stakes. You don't take shortcuts. You don't take chances if you don't have to. If you don't absolutely have to, you don't take a chance. And it served us well. When a storm, those storms come, we were prepared. And it served us well.

Q: Was it easier with a four-pole tent than a three-ring, or what was the secret, David?

Rawls: There wasn't any . . . as a matter of fact, I think it went a little faster. We could tear that show down in 25 minutes . . . now that's running. But we did in a few occasions—25 minutes.

Q: The reason I asked what it takes, in Union, Missouri, at night, Billy Morris had the elephants at that time—2000, 2001—because

Josephine and Joe [Silverlake] were still with the show.

Rawls: He was cooking . . . wasn't he the cook?

Q: Well, he was on the front door—I don't know about the cooking. And Josephine was just back in her trailer.

Rawls: OK, that might be. He cooked for me one year.

Q: Well, he was on the front door. And Bill Brickle was ringmaster for a short while.

Rawls: OK, alright.

Q: Did you see that tape I sent you?

Rawls: I'm sure I did. I have a multitude of tapes in my home in the closet there. But I recall that year very well. Bill—when he came—did his dress-dog act. And I hired him as announcer, but I changed that year to Loomis, Justin Loomis. And I made him announcer, and I think he's still announcer for Patti Gatti. The guy did a great job, had a wonderful voice.

Q: That was also the year that you had a three-or-four-piece band. Down at Mountain Home [Arkansas], you had Tommy Thomason, and Justin and the clown with the banjo.

Rawls: Yeah, I was one of the last ones to go to the taped canned music. I tried to keep a band as long as I could because I liked it. I enjoyed it and the public liked it. And even when I went to canned music, I had a drummer. Because he would just accentuate those acts and some of the tricks that they did. And it kept the public involved in the show.

Q: So under the one-ring tent, when did you start introducing the seat wagons?

Rawls: I'm trying to remember.

Q: You ran that show pretty frugally those first years.

Rawls: Oh yeah. We didn't—believe me, I didn't. When we made money, I put it in the show. And I improved the tent or improved the seating or I improved the generators or, you know, improved the trucks. I tried improving the

trucks at the same time I improved the winter quarters. And I built the winter quarters at the same time during those years. I first . . . I saw those seat wagons somewhere. A hydraulic seat wagon and got to investigating it. And a guy in Iowa, the ones that I really liked, he built them—Kay Park Recreation is the company. I got in touch with him, and he just happened to have—he sent four seat wagons to Atlanta for the Olympics that were supposed to be purchased, but they returned them, didn't finish paying for them. So he had four seat wagons there. And he said, "If you'll buy all four of these wagons, I'll make you a deal on them." And I said, "What kind of a deal?" So he told me, and I said, "Alright, you've got a deal." And it's the only thing that I bought on the show that I ever financed. I never—I paid for them in two years, but I never financed anything on the circus. It's the only thing I ever financed, but it was worth it to me. And the hydraulic seating and the seat wagons made a lot of difference.

Q: I think it was about 2000, I saw the Plunkett show, and he was so grateful that you had allowed him to pay off the tent, old tent, the



Rawls watches brother Bobby paint semi promoting Russian bear act at Kelly Miller winter quarters in Hugo, Oklahoma before the 2000 season. M. Lane Talburt Photo.

three-ring tent that he was using at that time—James Plunkett.

Rawls: Oh yeah. I've known James since . . . that's funny, his dad and I were. His dad [Corky] was a trampoline performer, and a good one. James was too. And he was a young kid when I was on the show—and I believe that was Carson and Barnes that I trouped with Corky, when my brother and I were with the trampoline act. And they were . . . we would practice, and he was good enough to come practice with us. Because he was a great trampoline performer. And he would show us various tricks and show us different things. And we incorporated young James into the act. The guy was just a kid, but he was fearless. James and I were practicing; I was the understander on it. I would catch him triple full to the shoulders, and he was just fearless at the time. I've known James since he was a little kid.

Q: Well he was forever grateful for that.

Rawls: Well he didn't need to be grateful. I mean, I was glad to be able to do it. I like James and [his wife] Weiner, and they've done a great job, and they're fun to be around. Great people. And I went to Corky's funeral, and they did an old-fashioned Irish wake . . . one of the few funerals where they really did do an Irish wake. And it wasn't as much going to a funeral as remembering a life.

Q: Norma [Davenport-Cristiani] liked to tell the story about when Corky's wife was about to give birth to James.

Rawls: June.

Q: And she liked to tell about the time that she was doing billposting for some show—it wasn't D. R.—anyway she was 8½ months pregnant. She called in and said, "Look I'm about to have this baby, I don't think I can make it." And whoever it was [Ben Davenport] said, "Can't you make just one more town for me."

Rawls: Laughs.

Q: You had some good acts, and you also had some real characters on your show, didn't you?

Rawls: Oh, yeah. No, like any show, you're going to have—and believe me, there were a lot of problems. We kept them close to our vest. You know, I'm not one to go out and tell people we're having trouble. But yeah, we had problems.

Q: For example, the year you had the Russian bear act and Eddie Steeples on the show.

Rawls: Oh, yeah.

Q: And was it in upstate New York where that altercation occurred?

Rawls: Yeah, I lost . . . my bear act couldn't work for several weeks or days. I had to drive the bear truck over the highway because the guy that drove the truck was in the hospital, and I lost my chimp act. All in one day I lost quite a bit of my show, but we . . . the show went on and we . . . we made it through and survived it.

Q: One of the interviews I did on the lot with Eddie in Waterloo, I believe it was about a month or two before you went up. He was talking about his wife, and he said, "She's my eighth wife and she's

the love of my life."

Rawls: I don't recall her name [smile].

Q: And she had the bird act.

Rawls: She was in the chimp act.

Q: I was talking to Ari [Eddie's son] a couple of years ago—he was with Jordon [World Circus] in Tulsa, and he said that the reunion between his dad and the Russian bear trainer wasn't all that good when they both rejoined the show. But you had the bear act—I remember taking a picture with you and Bobby posing in front of the truck. But you had the bear act that had been on Carson and Barnes the previous year, is that right?

Rawls: Correct. I hired them and I leased the truck and trailer because it was designed for the bears. And so I just repainted it with our colors and title.

Q: And here you had Eddie and the Russian bear trainer, and their relationship was somewhat antagonistic. Did they finish out the season on the show, the both of them?

Rawls: No. Eddie didn't come back. Actually, he got locked up in New York, and he got out before we closed that year. I think her name was Sylvia, wasn't it?

Q: Sylvia, that's right [Sylvan]

Rawls: I sent her home. I wouldn't let her work that chimp act. I told her, "There's no way that I'm going to let that chimp act in the show without Eddie."

Q: Billie. Was that the chimp's name.

Rawls: Billie Jo.

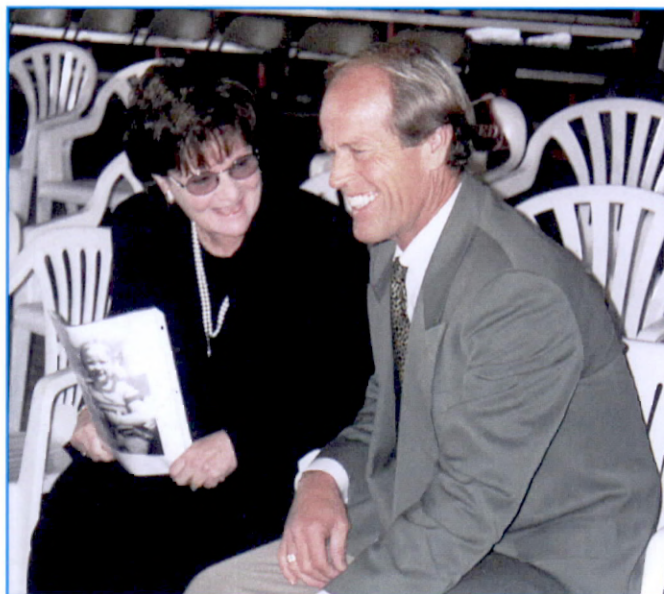
Q: She was about 30 years old, wasn't she.

Rawls: Yeah, it was not a young chimp. It was old and set in its ways. Anyway, I sent her on home from there. She was able to take the chimp. I think she went into Texas at the time. I said, "You need to go back to Texas and see what's going to happen with Eddie. But I don't think you should be working that chimp by yourself." I was afraid a

disaster was going to happen. And I kept the bears with me because I had an obligation. I had leased the bears and I had leased the truck and I wasn't about to fall short on that obligation. So I went ahead and kept the bears with me. And he came . . . he never came back to the show. She worked with her son, the small bears. I wouldn't let her work the big one. And did quite well. And she also did a plate-spinning act to supplement on the thing. And I finished the season. And at the end of the year he got—when he got out of the hospital, he came back here, and he and Sylvia had gotten together, and they came here to pick up those bears. And I'm trying to remember the whole story.

Q: I read several years later that he had been arrested in a motel in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma, and the bears had been confiscated.

Rawls: That's correct. A couple of days after the show closed, he came into winter quarters—he and Sylvia came in with a rental van and picked up the bears. And I notified the USDA immediately that the bears were leaving my possession and going back with them. And it was later that they had problems of some kind. And



David Rawls shares a moment with Barbara Byrd at the funeral of her father, D. R. Miller, in 1999 in Hugo, Oklahoma. M. Lane Talburt Photo.

I don't really know what the problems were. I heard the bears were emaciated and weren't being kept properly. They put them in a rental van, which was not conducive in my opinion. That's the reason I notified the USDA because it looked like it was going to become an issue—might become an issue someplace down the line, and I just wanted the USDA to know I didn't have anything to do with those bears.

Q: Speaking of the USDA, you had a pretty good record with animals on the show.

Rawls: Yeah, I think so—the USDA always thought I did. I mean I had occasions where I was written up for one thing or another, but you would fix them right away. They were ever-changing regulations. You've got to remember that the requirements for perimeter fencing and some of those things all came about while I had the show. So we would adapt. Roy Wells and I came up with the electric fencing and decided we would try it on our show and practiced here at the winter quarters with the thing with our girls, and it worked out very well. We were happy to do it.

Rawls: Absolutely. People who grew up in rural America, like this town right here. This is cattle country, horse country. They understand stock. They understand being around stock. There's some professionalism that needs to be changed, but dealing with cats or dealing with elephants, there's not much difference between horses and cattle. The big animals can hurt you, can cause problems. They're a headache. You've got to look after them. It's 24/7. Anybody who's been around a dairy farm, I want you to tell me when you take your vacation.

Q: Who are some of the better animal people that you've had on the show?

Rawls: Aw. I wouldn't venture to say anybody. Roy Wells would give me an excellent job. His wife [Cindy], and she's a Herriott—tremendous horse people. Laura [Herriott] was around my show. She had a dog act, and she also handled my menagerie stock, did a great job. I mean I've had a lot of people who really cared about what they were doing. I mean nobody works harder than the Herriotts in taking care of their stock. It's first, last and always with



Overview of Kelly Miller lot on a beautiful day at Columbia, Illinois on April 28, 2000. M. Lane Talburt Photo.

Q: Would you have wanted to run a circus without animals?

Rawls: No. When I say that, you have to be clear: the public wants to see the animals. To this day. They want to see the animals. They just want to see them taken care of. The only people that don't want to see animals have no concept and knowledge about it in the first place. They grew up on concrete. Most of the animal activists that are involved in the movement have no knowledge about animals. The closest thing they've ever seen to an animal is a dog or a cat in their home, maybe a parakeet in a cage. But I mean they have no concept about animals. The average communities you go to, they want to see the animals. They want to see them well taken care of. But they want to see the animals. But I think that's an issue that—the public demands it. You don't realize—I'll tell you what makes you realize it: You turn on your television today, and within an hour if you don't see an animal in a TV commercial, I'll eat your hat. I mean, more and more, animals are involved in television and the entertainment industry. Well, those animals are trained and handled by people and presented by people the same as ours. The concept that show people don't care about their animals is totally specious.

Q: And also animals are part and parcel of the rural life in America.

them. Same thing with Roy. If Roy was going to leave the lot for any reason, it was her there. I mean he just didn't go away that much. But if he was going to leave the lot for any reason, he would come and say, "I need to be gone for a couple of hours," and he knew I could back him up if he left the elephants. But he wouldn't just arbitrarily jump up and leave and leave those girls unattended. We just didn't do that.

Q: Did you always draw your elephants from the Miller herd?

Rawls: Yes. Nina, which was the elephant from the John Strong show, came from John Strong to me. She never was with Carson and Barnes. Now she's . . . I don't know that she's ever appeared with Carson and Barnes. But the other two elephants came from the Carson and Barnes herd.

Q: Which elephants did you have?

Rawls: The first year, it was Nina and I want to say it was Isla. I don't recall. And later I had Nina and Libby and Viola. And I had Nina and Libby and Viola for quite a few years.

Q: Who are the elephants that Armando Loyal has? Are they from Carson and Barnes?

Rawls: No. He doesn't have any Kelly Miller elephants. I believe those elephants are with Louie.

Q: Demoral?

Rawls: Demoral. And I pretty well had the same elephants all

the time. I did, early on, I may have had. First year, I only had two elephants, to start with. I mean Jim Roller was leasing an elephant from D. R. that got killed, electrocuted in a tragic occurrence. So D. R. and I got hold of each other, and I said, "Gosh, he can come over and I'll give him one of mine." I said he can take one of my elephants. So I kept Nina and he took the other elephant [Amy] on his show. At one time I had Nina and Viola and Brittany, which was an African. D. R. had three African elephants that he bought from the Hunts. And I had Brittany, a young African, on my show. And then he wanted to have a three African elephant act on his show, so he said, "I'd like to have that elephant back." And I said, "Well, what will you give me in trade?" And we negotiated, and I ended up with Libby out of the deal. So then I had three Asians.

Q: How did the relationship go with you and D. R.? How was your relationship with the Miller family with your show?

Rawls: I saw him, gave him his money, we cut up jackpots about how our seasons went.

Q: I last saw Barbara, I think it was in 2004, and I was interviewing her in her trailer and she was complaining that you were coming away every year with the money with your one-ring show [laughs]. D. R. liked to do things big, didn't he? So there was a big difference between D. R.'s concept of a show that was big versus David Rawls' version.

Rawls: Well, you have to go into D. R.'s background. He grew up on a little mud show. I mean they really had a dog and pony show when they first started. And they scuffled, and it was tough. And always lingering in D. R.'s mind, he remembered, when he thinks of a small show, he remembers his youth and his childhood with his dad, and it wasn't a pleasant experience. It was tough. So that was what he always thought of. My experience, having grown up on shows that size and kind and touring the Midwest and being with the King show, I saw a lot of good possibilities. And it was totally a different experience than D. R. had had with a small show. But he kind of shied away from a small show, and we had a lot of discussions to that effect, prior to [me] taking out Kelly Miller. He just knew that wasn't going to work, and I was just as adamant that it would. And he admitted it later, he said, "You've made a success out of it. You've done well." He said, "I really didn't think you could do that with a small show." And it made me feel good. I mean those were accolades from the King.

Q: And in the middle of all this, and in the latter part of your career, you got involved in local politics in Hugo [laughs]. And what brought that about?

Rawls: Primarily my kids. My kids were getting older and they were going into school, and I worked very, very hard and spent a lot of time away from them and was not involved in their lives. And I got to a point where I really wanted to try to change that. And so I hired Jim Roller to manage the show, and I stayed here in Hugo.

Q: That happened when?

Rawls: The mid-'90s. And just by accident someone encouraged me to run for City Council. Nah, I never was much of one for politics, but I finally agreed. I said, "Alright, put my name on the ballot." So I agreed, never thinking I would be elected. And I got elected to the city council and 15 minutes after I was sworn in I got elected mayor.

Q: What year was that?

Rawls: '95, '96

Q: And, so how long were you mayor?

Rawls: Two years.

Q: But you were still an active owner.

Rawls: Well I would leave to go to the show and visit. I would fly out to see the show on occasion, but . . . I did visit a lot but I wasn't . . . I had obligations here as mayor that I had to be here for.

Q: This eventually led to your being named city manager. Tell me about that.

Rawls: Well. That was after I left the show. As I was selling the show to John [North], I was familiar with people at city hall and some of the council that I served with were still there. And they had problems with the city manager and they wanted to let him go and they came and asked me would I hold down the fort until they hired a new city manager. And so I agreed to do that. And so I was interim city manager, and I was interim for about six months. And then they hired a manager, and he became ill and had to leave the job overnight. And so I stepped in again to give them time to

interview and hire another manager. Well, they went through that process and they decided that they wanted me to continue in this position if I would consider it. So I said okay. And I spent four years as city manager after that.

Q: And when was your last year.

Rawls: January 4 the year before last. So I've been out of it for about a year and a half now.

Q: So that makes it. . .

Rawls: 2011

Q: So what did you take from the circus and apply to Hugo. Hugo has a population of what, 10,000?

Rawls: No. It's only 6,000. The county is 18,000. You hear the joke all the time that politics is like a three-ring circus. I'll be honest with you, people have no concept of what it's like to run a circus. A little bit of everything. When it comes up you have to "quick" it. So you have to be able to shift from one problem to another rapidly. And the circus is a great training ground for that. There's not much difference with city hall. Because there's a myriad of things that you have to take care of and worry about: you've got a police department, a fire department, a utility department, water, sewer, streets, dog catching. You name it, the city's pretty well



*One of Kelly Miller's innovative seat wagons at Columbia, Illinois in 2000.
M. Lane Talburt Photo.*

involved in it—trash collection. So there's a lot of things going on in the day-to-day running of the city. And you have to deal with the public because you are their servant, you know; you work for them. And then you've got to deal with the politics of the city council. I happened to be in a position where I knew a lot of the employees of the city already. And that was advantage number one. And number two, I had a council that was excellent and would back me. And there's a quid pro quo to that: you keep your council informed; you don't give them any surprises. You don't go off half-cocked and then explain later, as much as you can. Now there are times when you have to make a decision and you don't have the opportunity to inform the council. But it's rare. You've got to keep your council informed and well aware. They don't want to hear it on the street; they hear it from you. And then dealing with the public. I think, keeping in mind that you work for the people. It's their town; it's their taxes; it's their city. And so if they've got questions—no matter how idiotic, you listen. And you're there to help solve their problems.

Q: But nevertheless the circus industry is a major citizen of Hugo.

Rawls: Yes.

Q: Tell me, what is the impact of the circus on Hugo?

Rawls: Over the years the impact has been tremendous. At one time there were nine shows that came out of this town. It's just three today. And so the economic impact is pretty substantial. But the relationship has always been a good one. It was initiated by the Miller family and the man who ran some grocery stores here named Vernon Pratt. He was a circus fan and circus enthusiast. And he enticed the Millers to come here during the [Second World] War. I think the first winter was 1941 [later] that they wintered here. And at that time, they were doing tremendously. D. R. was in the Army. He was overseas at the time and he wasn't even here. But they were having some very good years financially. And as their success maintained and sustained, they bought a lot of property on the east side of town and established a winter quarters and a reputation with the people of the community. And I can remember coming here as a child, and it wasn't anything unusual to be in the circus business at the bank, at the churches, or at schools. It was pretty well accepted. There were a few people who didn't have much to do with show people but just because they came from totally different sides of life. But as far as the community is concerned, circus has been a part of Hugo for 60, 70 years. And Hugo has been part of the circus for 60, 70 years as far as we were concerned.

Q: And it's your home.

Rawls: It is our home. Our children grow up and go to school, and it's part of us. And we have just as much love and admiration for our little town as anyone who lives here.

Q: At the same time, Choctaw County is one of the poorest counties in the state and nation.

Rawls: Consistently, it's always been on the lower side of the poverty scale. There's two things that you can derive from that. The poverty level—I mean we're never going to be wealthy and rich, like

a Norman [Oklahoma] or a Gaithersburg, Maryland, by any stretch of the imagination. But by the same token, when times are bad, we don't tend to feel it as much because we already are on the lower side of the scale. Things don't change a lot in that aspect.

Q: What were the factors that lead you to decide to fork over the ownership to J. R. North?

Rawls: My kids wanted to raise their—they had kids. And they wanted the opportunity to try town life, as opposed to circus life. And I had always brought my children up to believe they could do anything they wanted to do. They have the education, the background to do anything they wanted in life. I didn't want them to be tied to show business because that's all they knew how to do. And the same thing was taught to me. Education. Neither one of my parents had a formal education. But they saw to it that all of us did, and had the opportunity for it, and impressed how important

it was. And so I imparted that to my children, and they wanted the opportunity to impart that to their children. So they wanted the opportunity. But I'm not getting younger, and I had achieved all that I dreamed personally, you know, that I had dreamed for myself. So if they didn't want to run it, I was losing my enthusiasm for keeping it out. And John North came about as an accident. I made the announcement to my people in Chicago, at Napier, that we were going to close the show, and we weren't going to take it out the next year. And that word got across the industry pretty fast. And I got a phone call a month or so later from Jim Royal. And he said, "I hear your show's for sale." I said, "Yeah, it might be." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "I have a buyer

that might be interested." I said, "Really. Who?" He said, "Well, I'm not at liberty to tell you right now." And I said, "OK, that might make it a little more difficult." I said, "What can you tell me?" He said, "I can tell you she's from Europe." I said, "There's someone in Europe interested in buying my show?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "OK." He said, "Do you have a price?" And I said, "Yeah," and I told him. And he said, "Well, let me get back to you." And the second phone call, he said, "We're in agreement on the price." I said, "Well, before we can do anything with the price, I have to know who's buying." And he told me it was John North. And he initiated the conversation; I talked to him over the telephone before I ever met him. But later we met and hashed out some of the details and moved from there. It was quite an ordeal to sell the show. It took more energy and effort and work than I had ever dreamed.

Q: Was that partially because of the Kelly Miller title?

Rawls: No. I contacted my partners immediately, and they were in agreement right away.

Q: Was that Barbara?

Rawls: Barbara, yeah. And Loraine Jessen, Jess [former general agent for Carson and Barnes] had passed away and so had D. R., but they were in agreement. And so there weren't any qualms about that. It's just the details of selling a corporation. And at the time we only sold the show. We didn't sell the winter quarters. That took



Kelly Miller concession stand on midway at Mountain Home, Arkansas on April 14, 2001. M. Lane Talburt Photo.

place just recently.

Q: Was that this year?

Rawls: Early this year [2012] we sold the winter quarters.

Q: And so how do you feel to be a man without a circus? Do you miss it?

Rawls: Yeah, I miss it. I'll tell you what I miss. I miss show business. I always enjoyed being on the lot, and I miss people that I had grown to know over the years, even before I took over Kelly Miller. People across the country that you see once a year as you're on tour with Kelly Miller or whatever. I miss that to some extent. And there's nothing that filled my soul more than a beautiful day, a green grassy lot and a tent full of people. Those are wonderful feelings, and to know that you pleased them.

Q: But you didn't stay away, did you? What are you doing?

Rawls: I'm consulting on the routes and marketing for Barbara [Byrd]. Nah. And would I do it again? No. I'm kind of like the Marine Corps. Once a Marine, always a Marine, but I don't want to do it again [laughs]. And it's that way here. But the 25 years that I had Kelly Miller out were wonderful, enjoyable, memorable years. The laughs and pleasures far outweighed the trials and tribulations. I'm blessed. And I appreciate the fact that I had the opportunity to do what I'd always enjoyed and dreamed of doing.

Q: Tell me again about your dad's heritage. Was he a first generation [showman]?

Rawls: No. His father was a pitchman and traveled with shows, not just with circuses. But he was killed when dad was 9 years old—got hit by a truck and my dad was with him. And then my dad's mother died when he was 11 or 12. And after his father's death, she had gotten together with Willie Rawls; that's where the Rawls comes from. Our real name was McLaren. So Willie raised him. And through the good graces and other show people, he was sent to a Catholic boarding school during school time and went through the 10th grade in Searcy, Arkansas, which was a Catholic boarding school. And the brothers taught him discipline and taught him a lot of things. But he spent most of his life on these shows. And under Willie's tutelage and they called him "Junior, Junior Rawls." But my dad had very little family contacts or connections. And so when he had a family, he was—I mean that was primary—family was primary.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Rawls: There's eight of us. And raised a big family and all healthy and doing well.

Q: How are you in the pecking order?

Rawls: I'm the oldest. [The others, in descending order, are Bobby John, Margaret Lucille, Susan Francis, Harry Christopher, Michael Patrick, Mary Kathleen and William Arthur.] But my father—I assume these lessons came from a variety of places, but he was always a quiet, fairly gentle man. He was a strict disciplinarian. With a family you had to be. Being a big family and being in show business and being on the road every day, you had to be a strict

disciplinarian. Everybody had a job to do. But he wasn't a yeller or screamer or pugnacious. And he always, from early childhood, he treated people like you wanted to be treated. He taught me a lot of lessons and a lot of things about how to treat people, and how to conduct and take care of yourself. Always be a gentleman, and be respectful of other people's cares and their needs and wants. I learned a lot of lessons and they served me well in running the show or serving as mayor here in town, or whatever I did. My father's lessons stuck with me.

Q: Your dad wanted his children to do better than he did, right?

Rawls: Sure. And that's an American story; that's not a show business story. I think every generation wants better for their children—especially if they had little. The less you had the more you wanted an opportunity for them to have life better than you had it. But the parents who grew up through the Depression and went through those hard times, I think taught us a lot of great lessons to the rest of us. Those who went through World War Two—the Greatest Generation ever known, I mean, those are people who could teach us all a lot of things.

Q: I guess you learned a lot about thrift.

Rawls: Ah, yeah. Believe me there wasn't a lot of money. Believe it. I mean we grew up poor. And it didn't seem like it to us, once you realized that there were a lot of people that didn't have. So it wasn't unusual. We didn't think anything about it. But they were well aware of it. After becoming a father and a parent myself I know what trials and tribulations they must have gone through in struggling to make ends meet and put food on the table and a roof over your head and clothes on your back every day. Because it's not an easy chore and it's something you do worry about, but not until you have children of your own.

Q: When did your dad die, and how old was he?

Rawls: My dad was 79, and he passed away five years ago.

Q: And your mom is living next door to you?

Rawls: Next door. She's 84 and still doing well. And I'm so thankful that she's able to be right next door and still living independently. But close enough that she can walk over and sit down and have a cup of coffee.

Q: And your wife?

Rawls: My wife. She's still working for Kelly Miller. She does the accounting and keeps the books for Kelly Miller. John bought the show and hired my wife. She said I sold both [laughs].

Q: And that's who?

Rawls: Brenda. BW

David Rawls was among Lane Talburt's initial on-camera subjects when in 1999 he began videotaping interviews as a means of documenting, then telling the stories of performers, workers and owners of the contemporary American circus—from the early 1920s through today. A former journalist, Talburt is a resident of Stratford, Connecticut.



Cover of the 2002 Kelly Miller program. Pfening Archives.

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Photo by Jan Sopelak

Magic Under the Barnum & Bailey Big Top

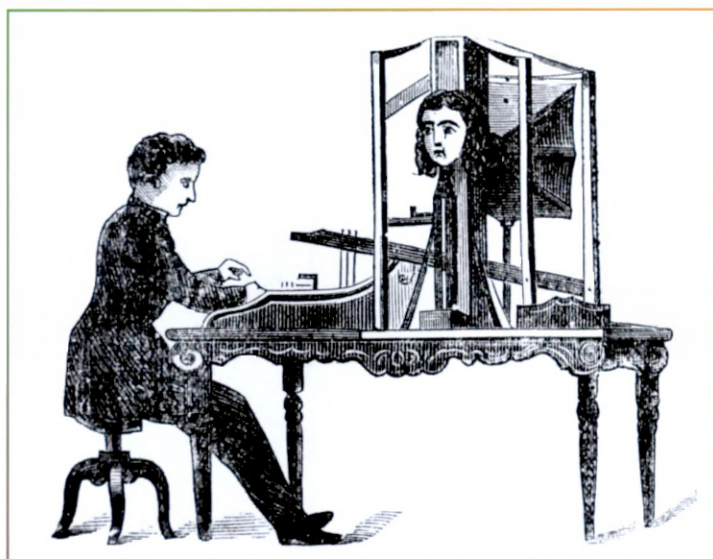
by John F. Polacsek

The world of magic has been intertwined with that of the circus on numerous occasions, and in multiple venues on the circus lot. Magic and illusions have been presented in the menagerie, the museum, in the performance ring, as part of the concert, in the sideshow and under the black tent.

P. T. Barnum among other occupations was a magician who found that one could make a living entertaining the public. While on a lecture tour of England, Barnum engaged the Austrian magician Anton Kratky-Baschik (1821-1889) as a warm up act to amuse the waiting audience. From February 1859 to August 1860, Kratky-Baschik performed feats of magic and played the musical instrument known as the "cormelodian," his latest invention, to those waiting to hear with the Great Showman.¹

Barnum was always interested in novelties, and in 1846 made a trip to Philadelphia where he was introduced to Joseph Farber, an inventor who created a speech synthesizer. Barnum dubbed the novel talking machine the Euphonia, and contracted to have the machine and its inventor tour England. Farber had limited success with his talking machine, and after his death the Euphonia was passed down to his niece. Her husband fashioned himself as a new Professor Faber, and was contracted by Barnum to travel with the circus.

In 1873 P. T. Barnum's Great Traveling World's Fair, Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, Hippodrome, Polytechnic Institute, National Portrait Gallery, Hall of Classic Statuary, Mechanics and Fine Arts, Garden of Zoology and Ornithology, and Dan Castello's, Sig'r Sebastians, and Mons D'Atalie's Grand International Equestrian & Hippodromatic Exposition traveled the country. The wide-eyed



The Farber Talking Machine was featured in the 1873 P.T. Barnum booklet. Author's collection.

patrons could see the entire twenty shows under interconnected canvas tents for the admission fee of fifty cents for adults and twenty-five cents for children under nine.

When the public entered the museum tent, on a stage was Professor Farber's wonderful talking machine presented by Professor and Madame Faber. This novel sensation sang, laughed, and talked in many languages. Barnum proclaimed that his patrons were seeing the "Sensation of the Age!" and he and he alone had exclusive rights to it for six months while the show was on the road.

The flamboyant press notices spoke of paying \$20,000 to present the "Talking Machine," as it was called, to the public. The attraction was such a success that it was featured on the Barnum Circus from 1873 to 1875.²

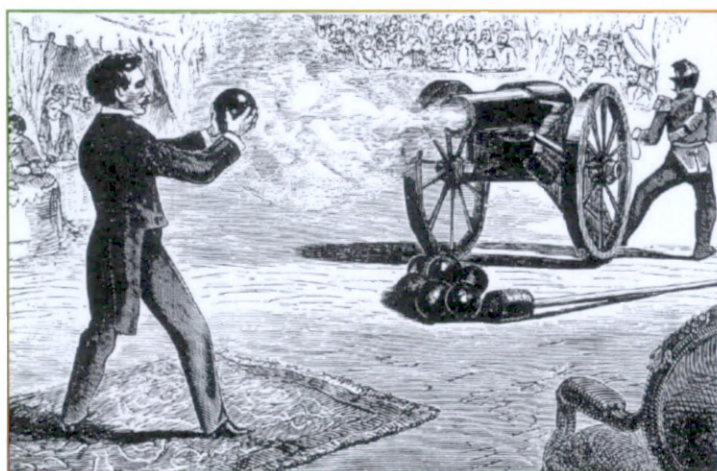


P. T. Barnum and James A. Bailey were major promoters of magic and illusions. The show's "40 Supernatural Illusions" was prominently displayed in this 1889 Strobridge lithograph. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Howard Tibbals Collection.

Magic moved from the museum tent to the main circus performance when the P. T. Barnum Circus hired the Italian magician Count Ernest Patrizio (1845-?) late in the 1878 season. The Count was appearing at the Union League Theater in New York when the circus opened at the American Institute that spring, and may have come to the attention of show management then.

His performance was divided into three parts, with the first part including some entirely original illusions. In one called "The Marvelous Library," the audience was invited to select a number of poetical works at random, and then from sealed envelopes the Count produced the page number and first line of a stanza of that particular volume. In the second part Rita Patrizio gave a clever exhibition of "instantaneous memory." The third part went beyond the "nocturnal spiritual phenomena" as it involved the marvelous feat of catching a cannon ball fired from a presumably real piece of ordinance. The Count performed at the Opera House for a month, and played May 27 and 28 in Jersey City, New Jersey.³

Later that year Patrizio was made an offer he could not refuse, and in September he was



Facing a real cannon and standing in the ring Count Patrizio with only leather gloves on his hands caught a cannon ball in flight. Author's collection.

a featured performer under P. T. Barnum's big top, joining in Baltimore for the September 23-25 engagement. A correspondent to the *New York Clipper* noted the following: "Although the main tent was the largest ever erected here, it was filled to overflowing each performance, and almost as many more were turned away. The show was excellent, the chief features being Charles Reid, pad-rider; Katie Stokes, bareback rider; the trained stallions, introduced by Carl Anthony, their trainer; the double somersaults of John Batchellor over six elephants; the hurdle rider, William Morgan; the trick-rider Charles Fish; and the great act by Signor Patrizio catching a ball fired from a real cannon. He failed in doing this the first two performances, on account of not having gloves of sufficient thickness; after this was remedied he had no further trouble."⁴

After the Baltimore date the circus played at Washington, D.C., then headed north and closed the tenting season at Jersey City, New Jersey. From October 14 to November 30 the circus performed indoors at Gilmore's Garden in New York City. The newspaper advertisements for P. T. Barnum's New and Greatest Show on Earth proclaimed that 10,000 visitors daily came to Gilmore's Garden at Fourth Avenue and Twenty-Sixth Streets, where the very best families in

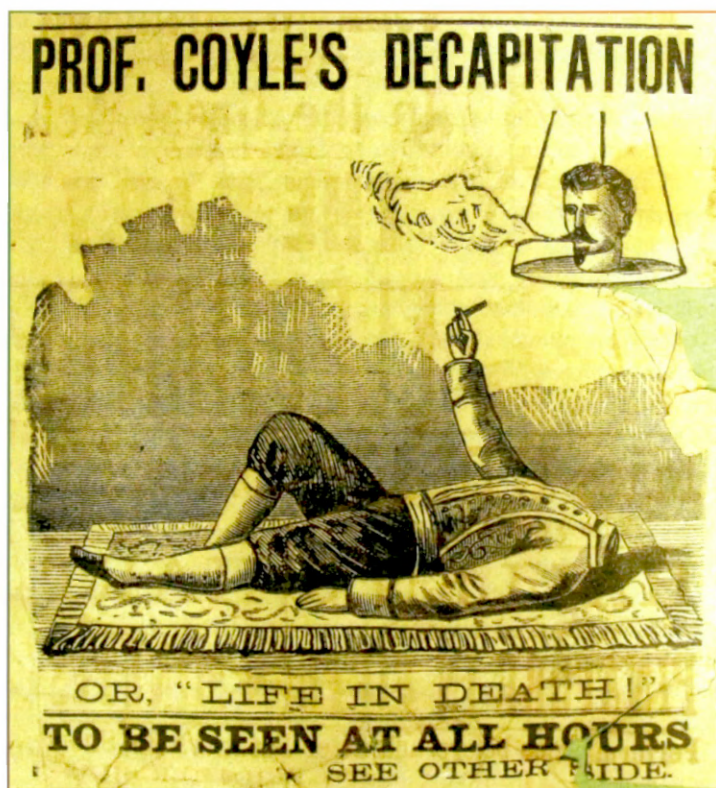
the city filled the immense amphitheatre to witness the marvelous acts. The patrons were entertained by performing stallions, a herd of elephants, six lady equestrians, trained wild beasts, harlequins, clowns, and jesters. One of the main features was Patrizio "making a living target of himself daily" by catching a cannon ball fired from an army field piece.

A *New York Times* review noted: "Many of the old favorites and some new ones were on hand. The horses, or course, were the chief attraction, and the Trakene Stallions received an enthusiastic welcome. These horses were introduced by Carl Anthony, and exhibited a high degree of training. The well-known bareback rider, C. W. Fish, was warmly greeted, introduced a number of new and daring feats into his performance, and was presented, upon retiring, with a large floral bank, supporting a horse worked in white flowers. Barnum has secured the services of Count Ernest Patrizio, and the genuine sensation of the evening was afforded by the loading of a six-pounder brass field-piece three times, with moderate charges of powder and solid iron cannon-balls, the first of which was fired at a wooden target that it shattered. The other balls were caught in the hands of the Count as he stood directly in front of the piece, and not 10 feet from it. The show is to remain at the Garden for a limited season, and performances will be given every afternoon and evening."⁵

Every afternoon and evening the attractions at Barnum's combined museum, circus and menagerie could be witnessed at Gilmore's Garden. High on the list was Patrizio "who does some wonderful things in sleight-of-hand and adds greatly to the popular enjoyment." The Count was: "Greeted at each exhibition, with a Tornado of Applause as he faces death at the cannon's mouth, standing within ten feet and directly in front of a cannon,



George Bunnell operated sideshows on the Barnum Circus throughout the 1870s. This letterhead, dating from that period, shows his Dime Museum in New York on the left, and his tents on the right. George O. Starr, his General Agent, later became a Barnum and Bailey Circus executive. Pfening Archives.



Professor Coyle was one of the presentations in George Bunnell's sideshow on the Barnum Circus in 1880. His *Life in Death* illusion showed a decapitated head smoking a cigarette. Zweifel Archives.

loaded in the presence of the audience. He makes a living target of himself, and as the missile is speeding from the mortar, PATRIZIO CATCHES THE CANNON BALL WITH HIS HANDS! Amid the flame and smoke of the discharge. It is the MOST TERRIFIC, TREMENDOUS EXHIBITION of human nerve and strength recorded or seen in Ancient or Modern Times.”⁶

Patrizio appears to have found a special niche in the circus performance where he excelled. The opportunity of performing sleight of hand tricks quite a distance from the audience may have been limited, but it was over powered by his cannon ball act. The whole audience watched as the cannon splintered a wooden target, and then sat watching the outcome of the next two discharges. Among the audience were Civil War veterans who had seen the destruction of artillery close at hand, and were amazed that he could catch cannon balls.

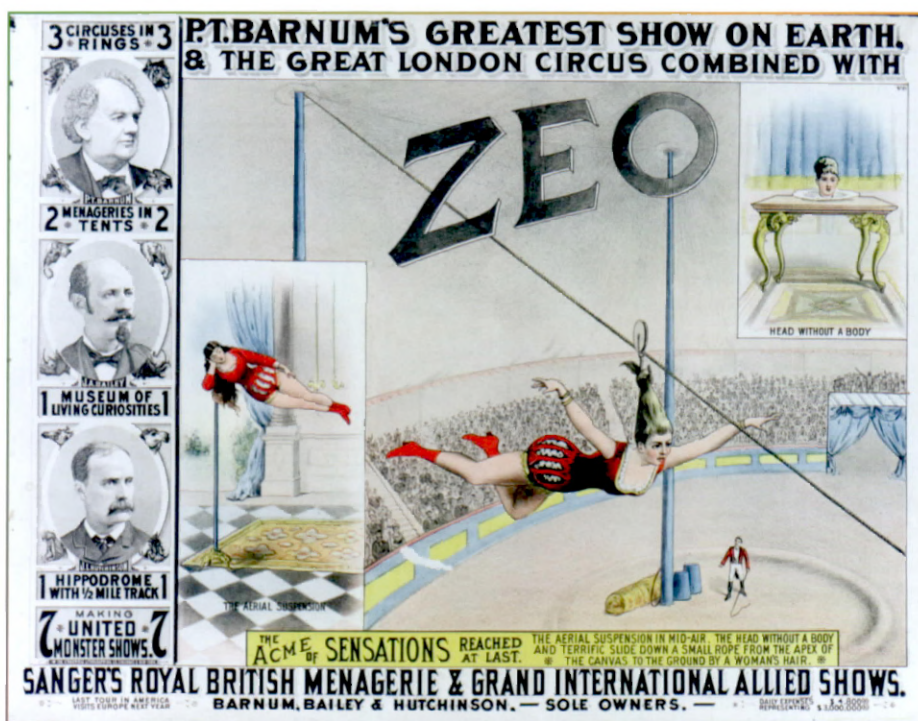
This performance in front of the audience also helped to overcome the Count's lack of command of the English language. In April, 1878 reviews of his magic performances noted that in “the first place he is not a talker, and a ready tongue is the first and prime requisite of success in the trick business.” Reviewers were honest in saying that “Patrizio may be a good talker in his own language, but he makes a terrible mess of the English tongue.” So a non-verbal connection to the audience worked as the spectacular idea of catching a cannon ball in front of the assembled

masses was a tremendous hit.⁷

George B. Bunnell actively promoted the Palace of Wonders/ Sideshow on P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth from 1871 to 1880. In 1876 he managed the three sideshows and for twenty-five cents patrons could see the following: in one tent 100' by 70' and fitted with stage scenery and curtains like a regular theatre, variety performances were given by a company of fifty male and female artists, and a ballet troupe of sixteen ladies. A second tent, 42' by 30', held a number of living curiosities. The third pavilion was a black tent, containing a diorama illustrating scenes in the history of the United States, along with moving figures illustrating a scene of horrors and Dante's dream of the infernal regions.⁸

The 1879 season saw the addition of the Concert and Sideshow under the management of G. B. Bunnell with Professor Henry Coyle lecturing. The following season the sideshow attraction was listed as Bunnell's Great Annex and Palace of Wonders. The majority of attractions, such as the clog dancer, long haired lady, Everett the Prestidigitator, etc. were real enough. The illusion of Coyle's Decapitation or Life in Death was unique for it showed an elevated human head smoking. Neither Professor Coyle nor his particular magic illusion are noted in the P. T. Barnum 1880 Route Book, so it may have been presented for only part of the season.

The 1882 season saw magic return to the Barnum & London Consolidation which featured a special presentation by Zeo. This talented lady was Eva Walker whose main act was considered “The Acme of Sensations reached at last.” She performed high above ring number two on the tight rope, and then did an aerial suspension act. Her feature act required her long hair to be attached to a steel ring. As the band played she ascended from the tight rope to the apex of the tent and attached the ring to a pulley. She stood poised on a small platform and then stepped off into space. The band struck up a stirring march as she gained momentum and came



After Mrs. Eva Walker did a tight rope act she became Zeo and did a terrific slide suspended only by her hair. After the circus performance she was suspended in the sideshow with the aid of mirrors as shown in this 1882 Strobridge lithograph. Cincinnati Museum of Art Collection.

whirling toward the ground. Prop hands held tightly to ropes stretched across the rope, catching the pulley and acting as a brake to bring her safely to the ground.

A lithograph was produced to highlight Zeo's hair hang act and the artwork also featured two magic illusions The Aerial Suspension, and the Head Without a Body. Since the show's 1882 route book did not mention a magician, nor a location where the two magic acts would have been performed, it is speculated that they were shown in the sideshow. After the high wire and hair hang, Zeo galloped around the hippodrome track in the ladies flat horse race. She would just have enough time to change and be featured in the sideshow illusions at the end of the circus performance.⁹

The 1886 P. T. Barnum Circus had two separate venues for magic, in the sideshow and the concert. The sideshow featured Will. B. Wood (c. 1862-1908) who acted as the lecturer in front of the banner line, performed as a prestidigitator and worked a Punch and Judy act. Wood the Wizard worked from a temporary stage that allowed a close encounter with the audience. The stage was just high enough for him to be seen by the milling audience, and low enough that he could sell magic books and tricks.

In 1888 Wood decided to improve on Professor Adolph Seeman's Electra or Dreaming and Walking in Mid-Air Act. In November of 1886 Seeman advertised that his act was patented, and had only been seen on the East Coast in 1880 while performing in New York City. He had come from Berlin, Germany under the urging of Charles Feltman who operated Feltman's Ocean Pavilion and Combination Palace at Coney Island.

In June 1880 Seeman, "the greatest living magician" appeared as the first attraction of this commodious theatre. For his first trick various colored balls were transferred from a square box to a square glass box, followed by a series of card tricks. The feature of the show was the exhibition of Electra: "The Professor showed a smooth black rod which he held by force of attraction to his fingers. He held it last of all from the nail tips of his fingers of each hand. With this little demonstration he introduced his beautiful daughter Julia to the audience, and after poisoning her in air, without any visible connection with poles or wires, or supports of any kind, he swings into space in front of a back ground which throws her perfect figure out in bold relief. As she hangs upon nothing the Professor, who goes through the usual mesmeric forms, aids Electra to assume the statuesque poses of The Sleeping Beauty, Prayer, Maid of Orleans, Rob Roy of Scotland, Germania, Britannia, Mercury, Columbia, and Liberty.¹⁰

In November, 1888 Wood the Wizard advertised the grandest and only sensational novelty in the world called Edna Walking in the Air. The main feature of the act was Edna moving freely through the air and this was not a suspension

act. Edna moved about the entire stage a distance of twelve to fifteen feet off the floor. She also walked in open space with her feet up and head down, floating, sailing, throwing somersaults while up in the air, running on the walls and ceiling, and performing other miraculous feats too numerous to mention.¹¹

From his home in Shamokin, Pennsylvania Wood the Wizard could be contacted to provide a complete show with original illusions, new magical apparatus, the largest and finest automaton in the world, and elegant printing. Wood was active until February 1908 when he was "lost" with his daughter Bertha when the tugboat they were on foundered off Yucatan while on a tour of Central America. The tugboat captain claimed that a wave sank the vessel, but strangely enough all of the crew survived. An inquiry into the matter had the captain denying robbery, but no trace of Wood's \$14,000 bankroll ever surfaced.¹²

In 1886 Prof. Seeman from his Chicago address offered the Cremation Act, a description of which a reporter provided in May of 1888 when the magician Harry Kellar (1849-1922) was working on his version. It was presented in front of a back drop representing the interior of a crematory. Kellar's act was described as: "A young lady is placed on a small iron stand and covered with excelsior, which is set on fire. In the presence of the entire audience the young lady is apparently burned up. . . . I take these ashes and throw them into a large chalice. From this a dense smoke rises, which develops into gauze, and from its midst appears the spirit of the young lady. . . . It is a beautiful thing."¹³

By July of 1888 the new act was ready and Kellar's Cremation was performed on a Boston stage. *The New York Dramatic News* reviewed it in detail: "Kellar has founded the tragedy on an East India legend, the story being that a native woman removed the veil from her face and revealed her features to a Christian. The penalty for this offense was death by fire, and the poor girl was burned alive.

THE BEST
Concert and Variety Programme
EVER OFFERED.

READ THE ATTRACTIONS.

List of artists positively appearing in the
After-Entertainment of

Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth.

THE BENNETTS. Three noted champion rifle shots, including Annie Bennett, the champion lady rifle shot.
THE GREAT ZILETTA, in male character sketches.
GUNNY HOPPER, mystifying changes.
FLYNN AND ZILETTA, celebrated expert artists.
ADMIRAL DOT, vocalist and dancer.
CARROLL AND SNOW, plantation imitators.
DICK SANDS. No one in the world like him.

CONCLUDING WITH THE MARVELOUS
CREMATION ILLUSION!

In which a beautiful young lady is INCINERATED BEFORE
THE EYES OF ALL BEHOLDERS, a most thrilling act!!

What P. T. Barnum Says "I cheerfully commend the Concert performance as a very meritorious addition to our show."

The Many wonderful cures by Hood's Sarsaparilla have won
for it the title of "the greatest blood purifier ever discovered."



HOOD'S
SARSAPARILLA

Purifies the Blood. Makes the Weak Strong.
Creates an Appetite.

Prepared by C. I. Hood & Co. Lowell, Mass.

100 DOSES ONE DOLLAR.

Copyright (over)

With a cute child on the front, this advertising card for Hood's Sarsaparilla from the late 1880s encouraged circus patrons to stay for the after-show where they could watch a young lady being "incinerated before the eyes of all beholders." Author's Collection.

The Christian secured the services of a sorcerer, who obtained the ashes and, invoking the powers of the dark arts, produced the girl again, alive, unharmed and happy. As Kellar produces the act the audience first sees the executioner dragging the girl to the stake. She pleads for mercy, but there is none. The girl is pulled to a table about three feet square and about four foot high. The table, which is of iron, is surrounded by coarse woven wire, and is the crematory. The wire door is open and the girl is forced to sit on the table inside the enclosure, her hands secured to a horizontal bar above her head. The audience sees under and over the table and through the woven wire. The executioner touches a lighted match to the woman's gown and in an instant she is enveloped in flames. Remaining until the form settles into ashes, this cheerful gentleman takes his departure. The necromancer then appears. Securing all the ashes from the iron table he places them in a chalice on the other side of the stage. He pours liquid on them, when there instantly arises from the chalice a thick vapor. Presently there is discernible in these fumes the gauze of the girl's dress. The vapors grow thinner, and gradually the girl's form becomes visible, finally the fumes clear away, and the young woman, restored to life, steps smiling from the chalice. This act is accomplished on a brilliantly lighted stage. Kellar has abandoned the old sleight of hand tricks and the now-you-see-it-and-now-you-don't sort of magic."¹⁴

Two years earlier another noted magician performed this same Cremation act during the concert of the 1886 Barnum Circus. The magician who worked the concert, a special show after the main performance, was Frederick Eugene Powell (1856-1938).

Professionally known as the Great Powell, he was born in Philadelphia, and at the age of seven he was taken to see the magical performances of the celebrated Signor Blitz who presented his Temple of Wonders. The young Powell was fascinated, and from that time indulged in the study and practice of magic. He later joined George Wilson's Minstrel Troupe during the winter of 1885-1886 where he did a magic act and closed the show with his original Cremation scene.¹⁵

According to Powell, in 1886 he traveled on Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth presenting his Cremation Act in the concert, held immediately following the conclusion of the circus performance. The audience could stay in its seats after paying a nominal fee. Unfortunately Powell's Creation Act is not mentioned in the route book. It is possible that just like Count Patrizio he was only on the circus for a short time period that year and his performance was not

recorded.

However a major advertising campaign was conducted in conjunction with Powell's concert presentation by Hood & Company of Lowell, Massachusetts. Hood's popular carbonated drink flavored with sassafras was considered a medicinal beverage. The advertising cards promoting Hood's Sarsaparilla and the concert features of the Barnum Circus were widely circulated. P. T. Barnum was quoted as stating: "A Big Show for a small amount will be given immediately after the regular ring performance, embracing a great variety of highly sensational acts, comic songs, and character sketches, by the best company ever seen under canvas."

The cross marketing trade cards proclaimed that when the hippodrome races were over "Don't Leave Your Seats . . . but delay a while and see a young, beautifully formed and handsome Lady Dissolve into Air, right under your eyes." Another Hood card suggested that the patrons could stay in your seats so that they could witness "The Best Concert and Variety Programme Ever Offered."

There were seven artists who were "positively appearing in the After-Entertainment of Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth." This program would conclude "with the marvelous CREMATION ILLUSION in which a beautiful young lady is INCINERATED BEFORE THE EYES OF ALL BEHOLDERS, a most thrilling act!"

The cremation concert feature was presented in the circus ring for a few years. The *New York Clipper* noted that the 1889 Barnum and Bailey sideshow, concert

and other privileges were managed by Hagar and Henshaw. The concert that went on after the ring performance under the big top had Sig. Montana presenting the Cremation Illusion. In the annex or sideshow was Professor Powell who performed magic in addition to a Punch and Judy act. It is possible that the sideshow provided a more lucrative income as the artists were allowed to sell books and magic tricks to the crowds.¹⁶

Breaking new ground and providing multiple venues for magic on the circus brought new dimensions to the 1889 Barnum and Bailey Circus. It only took one ticket to see "Acres of Canvas, Three Colossal Circuses, a Wild Moorish Caravan, a Paris Olympic Hippodrome, an Immense Double Menagerie, a Magnificent Horse Fair, a Gigantic Marvel Museum, and a Wonderful Black Tent Illusion."

These illusions were created by magician Frank Hoffman and were first used indoors at New York's Madison Square Garden when the Barnum show opened a four week stand on March 23.



Sketch showing Hoffman's illusions set in alcoves with heavy drapes all around. The illusion on left is Thaumia. The well-lit interior looks more like a hall with an ornate ceiling than a tent. Image appeared in the 1890 Barnum and Bailey courier. Author's Collection.

The *New York Times* noted that one feature was particularly novel: "The front hall, over the main entrance, is to be filled with illusions and automatons. It is being decorated in a most elaborate style, and when finished, will be but dimly lighted. On the road this section of the show will be placed under a tent of black canvas."¹⁷

A call had been issued for all performers to gather at Madison Square Garden at 10:00 o'clock on March 18, 1889. The show needed to be fine tuned, and before the illusions could be set, there needed to be a beauty contest held in the Garden. The first week of April the circus was into their second week of performances, and a number of young ladies were needed for a special assignment: "Barnum & Bailey were in need of ten young women for their Hall of Illusions and therefore advertised for 'respectable young ladies, between 16 and 20 years of age,' to travel with the show from five to seven months. The result of this was the application of fully two hundred women at Madison Square Garden yesterday morning, the time set for inspection. Many of the applicants were manifestly older than 20 years, and a few were younger than 16. They all came with the consent of their parents or guardians, and were extremely anxious to join the circus. Ten of the most attractive were selected, and will hereafter pose in the Hall of Illusions. The others went away in sorrow and disappointment."¹⁸

It was not until a week long training course was completed that the winners of the beauty contest took their places before the public: "In the 'Hall of Illusions' upstairs the ten young ladies whose engagement was chronicled in *The Times* last week, made their first appearance, and by the display of only part of their persons made people wonder what had become of the rest of them. Their faces,

however, were all visible, and as they were good to look upon, the crowds who gazed upon them finally went away satisfied."¹⁹

For four weeks the Barnum & Bailey Circus was well received by the audiences at Madison Square Garden. There was an overwhelming demand for seats as the majority of the acts presented were entirely new. There were many novel features such

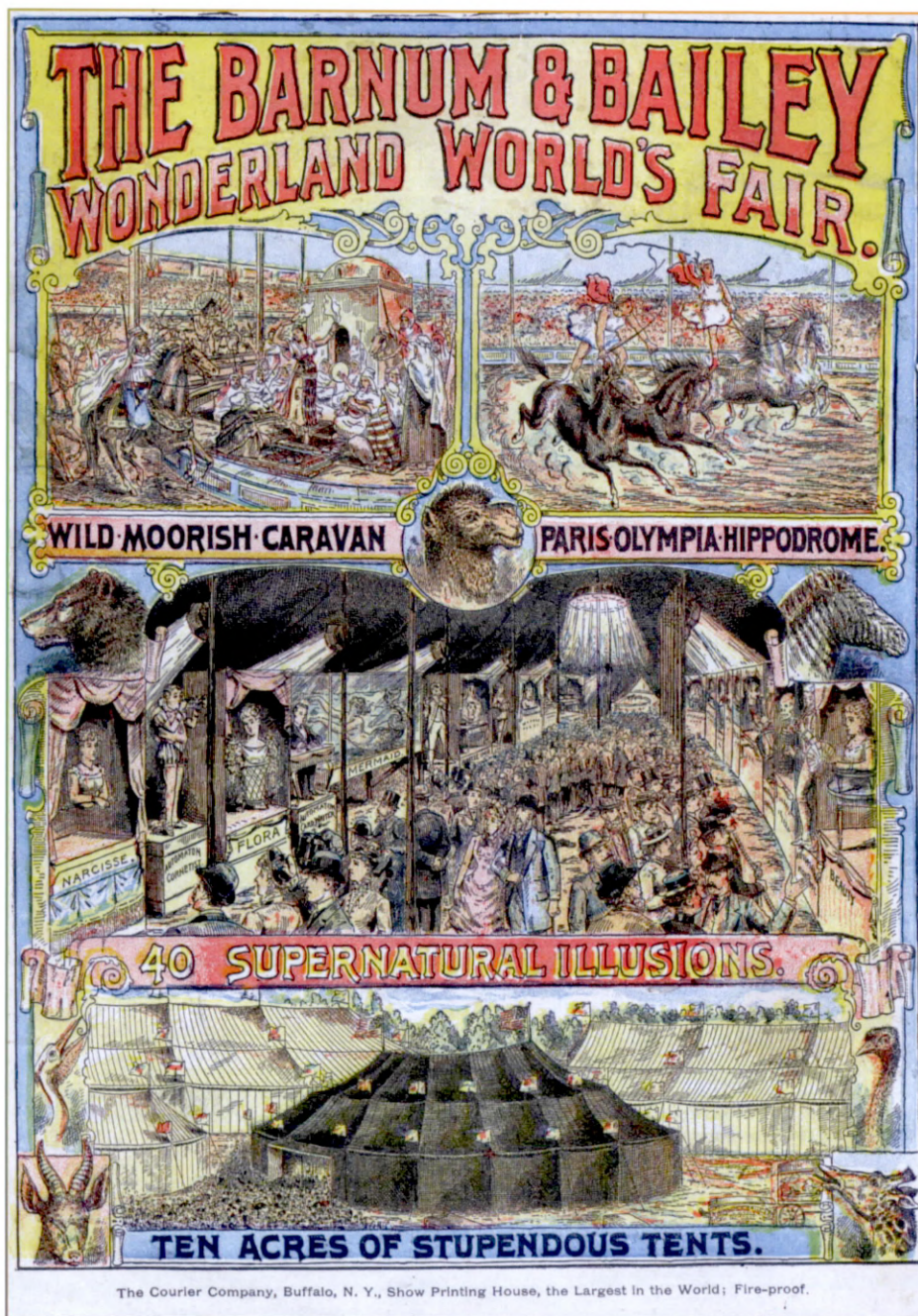
as the dwarf hairy elephant riding a bicycle, trained animals, wild Moorish caravan, hall of illusions, hippodrome races, and other features.

The circus closed its indoor engagement on April 20 and spread its canvas for a week in Brooklyn starting April 22. When the Greatest Show on Earth opened in Brooklyn it was the first time the Magician's Black Tent of Illusion was used. It was described as the "illusion tent, with its wonderful optical effects, produced by means of a series of cubic nets and the brilliant arrangement of electric lights, as a broad expanse of black canvas, the first ever raised by a show."²⁰

There were a thousand and one attractions on the Barnum and Bailey Circus, and P. T. Barnum was quoted "We give all for the small sum of 50 cents. Isn't it wonderful?" A reporter also noted that immense crowds were filling the tents—acres of them—viewing a world of wonders:

"[T]he great crowds were more than pleased with the exhibition. In addition to the menagerie Messrs. Barnum & Bailey have this year an entirely new attraction, or rather a series of them, which are exhibited in a separate tent made of black canvas. It is Dr. Frank Hoffman's gallery of supernatural illusions and visions, and the exhibition is a marvelous and startling one, to say the least."²¹

A reporter from the *Brooklyn Eagle* stated that the Black Tent



Most of the back cover of the 1889 Barnum and Bailey courier was devoted to Professor Frank Hoffman's "40 Supernatural Illusions" that appeared in their own black tent, shown at bottom of image. Pfening Archives.



Professor Hoffman and his forty illusions were the subjects of this 1889 Strobridge lithograph. In this view, the attractions appear to be inside the "black canvas tent" advertised on this poster. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Howard Tibbals Collection.

contained some of the shows most marvelous features: "Barnum's was literally packed to the roof last night; the interior of the vast tent was an amphitheatre of faces without a single break in the continuity. The black tent was the great center of attraction before and after the performance. The illusions are the most remarkable ever produced merely by the influence of light and shade so manipulated as to deceive every eye. Last night an old newspaper man, for years connected with a leading New York daily, could not be persuaded that the wonderful illusions were not mechanical effects. Even the eloquence of truthful Press Agent George Starr, who, like another George, 'never, never,' etc., could not persuade the doubting New Yorker until Mr. Starr, in the interests of truth, revealed the workings of the cabinet mysteries, in each of which, instead of headless bodies, decapitated heads, mermaids and Flora, were pretty young ladies. Then, and only then, were the newspaper man's doubts removed. One of the most amusing features of this 'black tent' can be observed by standing near a cabinet and listening to the commentaries of the crowd as they gaze on these wonders. Yesterday for the first time the illusions were tried with the incandescent electric light, which is much more difficult to control

than gas, but it worked fairly well. Mr. Barnum, along with his other effects, carries a complete electric plant. This 'black tent' is the first one known in the annals of circusdom and is an outcome of the active brain of Mr. James A. Bailey."²²

While P. T. Barnum is usually given credit for the show and the attractions, James A. Bailey, his partner, devised the Magicians Black Tent of Illusion. The 40 matchless works of magic included the following supernatural illusions:

"The Birth of Aphrodite—This magic triumph opens with a view of the ocean; the horizon illuminated by the prismatic, shooting rays of the Northern Lights. The life-size Apparition of Venus, bathed in the rosy tints of the Aurora Borealis, rises from the waves, ascends into airy space, and after assuming a number of bewitching poses, disappears by diving headlong into the deep.

"Pygmalion's Dream—The audience is permitted to inspect a marble statue of Galatea, which is then placed in full view on its pedestal, when wonder of wonders, its cheeks slowly redden, the hair assumes natural color, the marble warms into dainty flesh, the eyes are illuminated with intelligence, and the lovely creation lives and speaks. The last and most startling transformation is that of the beautiful Nymph back into stone, which finally assumes the form of a skeleton.

"The Witches Head—In this incredible achievement a square box is placed upon an ordinary table in full view. The box is opened at

the front, and a Living, Speaking Human Head is shown. The box is then taken from the table and exhibited to the audience with the head still in it.

"Flora—A most beautiful revelation, in which the head and bust of a lovely living woman appears in a basket of flowers.

"The Headless Trooper—In this marvelous mystery, a soldier is revealed lying on the ground, with his living head resting on a tray several feet above the body.

"She—Here the mysterious heroine of Haggard's strange romance is made a spiritual reality; seen through its misty veil.

"The Mermaid—This mythologic miracle presents a beautiful amphibious being, Half Woman and Half Fish, disporting in a miniature lake of living water.

"The Wizard's Aquarium—In this amazing creation an empty fish-bowl is first shown, and then magically filled with living fish.

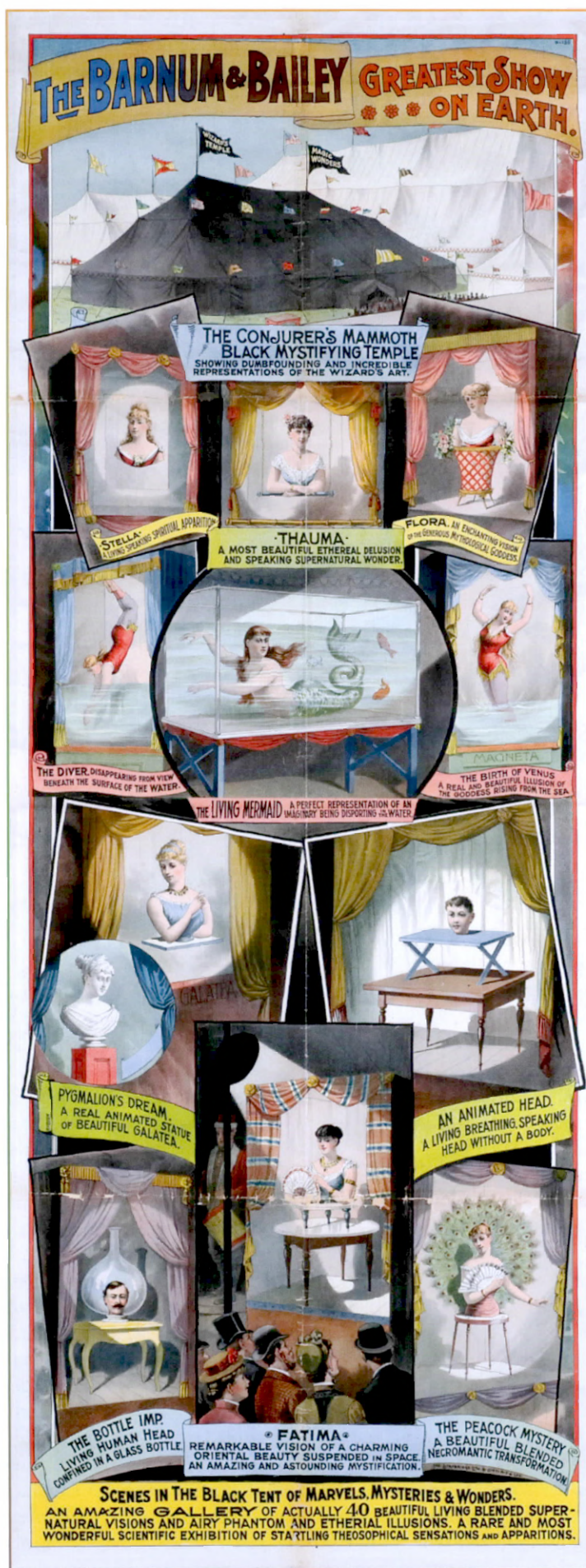
"The Peacock Mystery—The blending of a beautiful woman's living head and shoulders with the body of a Peacock, is one of the prettiest of these necromantic transformations. In this vision the Peacock's gorgeous tail unfolds and closes at will.

"Narcisse—In this aerial marvel the upper half of a young lady's person is shown on the seat of the swing, which oscillates in open space.

"Fatima—Reveals the upper part of an Oriental Beauty's body resting on a stool, which in turn rests on an undraped table.

"The Bottle Imp—The living

This Strobridge two-sheet, most likely dating from the early 1890s, depicts the illusions beneath the black tent. One wonders what the temperature was inside the pavilion on a hot summer day, given the combination of bright lights, large crowds, and black canvas. It must have been telling on the performers. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, John Lentz Gift.



human head seen in a narrow-necked, transparent glass bottle.

"The Fairly Bouquet—The most beautiful and bewildering illusion of the birth and death of the flower; which bud, blossom, wither and die in their few moments of magic life.

"Meteora—A star-born spite, dancing, revolving and disporting like a bird in mid-air.

"Many other equally novel, droll, incomprehensible and indescribable spectacles including The Alaska Wonder, Neptune's Bridge, The Centaur, The Transmigration of Indus, Grecian Metamorphoses, and The Gnome's Carnival."²³

The Black Tent was well received as the Barnum & Bailey Circus crisscrossed the country by railroad in 1889. At the end of the season the show sailed from New York for Liverpool, England for a special winter engagement. P. T. Barnum sailed on October 12 on the passenger steamer Etruria ahead of the show. One of the special attractions on the voyage was provided by P. T. Barnum for his fellow passengers as he performed sleight of hand in a special magic show.²⁴

The circus performed indoors from November 11, 1889 to February 15, 1890 at the London Olympia. The official list of show property on the tour included a number of Frank Hoffman's magical illusions. There were 40 illusion cabinets including the Peacock, a Magic Cabinet, Fatima, Mermaid, Rhoda, Thaum, Galatea, and a Suspension Table.²⁵

The Thaum illusion, depicting a pretty young woman cut off at the waist on a swing, was first presented in Europe during the 1870s by Hugh Washington Simmons, performing as Dr. Lynn. Albert Merlin brought the act to America in March of 1885, calling it Fujiyama. By October of that year the name was changed to Thaum and a beautiful young woman appeared on the swing.



The Thaumia illusion in which a comely young lady, whose body ends at her waist, appears on a swing was one of Frank Hoffman's illusions on Barnum and Bailey. This 1889 Strobridge lithograph makes subtle use of the light in the upper left hand corner of the poster. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Howard Tibbals Collection.

In the spring of 1890 a notice appeared in the *New York Clipper* that F. Hoffman, Barnum and Bailey illusionist, was home from London, and had obtained some of Europe's latest illusions and magicians novelties. Inquiries could be sent to his home at 62 Franklin Street, Jersey Heights, New Jersey.

Another advertisement in the March 8, 1890 *New York Clipper* read: "For Sale—eight of the famous Hoffman illusions used by Barnum & Bailey in the

Greatest Show on Earth Last Season." These illusions were listed as "being in perfect order," considering they had traveled across the country by train and had been shipped to and from England for the Olympia season. The illusions were ready for immediate use with any show, together with the boxes, lights and all necessary furniture. Among the illusions were: The Mermaid, the Headless Trooper, Rolla, Thoda, Automatic Mill, Omega, Aerial Suspension and Aphrodite. There were also twelve automatic performers in perfect condition, nearly new, and but little used. Those interested could contact Hoffman, care Barnum & Bailey Office, 1127 Broadway, New York.²⁶

Ads for recycled circus equipment and illusions were common in the *New York Clipper*. Hoffman needed to dispose of his used illusions for he was producing new attractions for the 1890 edition of the Barnum and Bailey black tent.

A number of other circus proprietors also wanted to offer something unusual to the public. Just a short distance away at 201 Centre Street in New York City was the office of the newly created Washburn and Arlington's Circus, Menagerie, and Hippodrome. In March, 1890 its ads appeared in the *Clipper*, wanting good people for the concert, side show and circus, and for a man to do magic, Punch and Judy, and being capable of putting on illusions. This talent was necessary as the Washburn and Arlington Show had purchased the used illusions and a black tent from Prof. Hoffman.

Leon Washburn and George Arlington organized this new circus in 1890 and a lithograph illustrating their new Monster Black Tent of Magic Visions, showed similarities to the Barnum and Bailey black tent view of the previous year. While the names of some of the attractions were changed, such as Thaumia to Narcisse, the basic arrangement within the black tent was very similar. On exhibit were the lady on swing, a coronetist, a lady in basket of flowers, a card writer, an imp in a bottle, a mermaid, and other illusions.



A number of Frank Hoffman's illusions were sold to the Washburn and Arlington show in the spring of 1890. This Shober and Carqueville lithograph shows the illusions in an arrangement similar to that on Barnum and Bailey. Courtesy Bob Sheets.

Possibly not wanting to copy the artwork produced by the Strobridge Lithograph Company of Cincinnati, a new poster was produced by Shober & Carqueville of Chicago. Charles Shober owned a lithographic printing firm from 1857 until 1871 when it was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire. He then took over the management of the Chicago Lithographing Company from Louis Kurtz and Edward Carqueville, and in 1876 it was renamed Shober and Carqueville. It was one of the Midwest's major printers of chromolithographed sheet music covers, theatre and circus posters, maps and trade cards in the 1880s.

Leon Washburn came from a family of showmen who produced Washburn's Great Indian Amphitheatre and Circus from 1854-1857. Leon began to produce circuses such as Washburn's United Monster Shows in 1882, the Washburn & Hunting Circus in 1884, and was active until 1906. In the 1880s he was the proprietor of Stetson's Uncle Tom's Cabin Company, and in 1890 joined with George Arlington.

George Arlington was into sideshows and unique attractions. As early as 1885 he managed the original Aztecs as a sideshow attraction on the Van Amburgh Circus. In 1886 he was on Barnum and Bailey in the confectionary department, as the concessions department was then called, as the superintendent of a candy stand. In 1888 he was manager of privileges which would have put him in contact with the concert and sideshow attractions. In 1890 and 1891 he was proprietor and general agent of the Washburn & Arlington circus. He returned to the Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1899 moving up from 1903-1905 to become manager of privileges and owner of the sides show and annex.

The Washburn and Arlington Show opened on May 1 at Bristol, Pennsylvania and a pre-season review noted that the show was brand new. The circus and hippodrome tent was 120' round with three 42' middle pieces, the dressing room tent a 50' round top, a side show top 70' round with a 30' middle piece, and they also used a black illusion tent. The whole show was moved on a train of twelve cars made up of two box cars, one sleeper and seven flat cars, with two advertising cars in advance.

Among the performers on the show were S. F. Cody's troupe of cowboys and sharpshooters including Wichita Jack, Wild Horse Jack, Yellow Stone Bill, and White Cloud's troupe of Indians. The annex feature was made up of forty wild broncos, eight Arabs, ten Indians, ten cowboys, and ten Mexicans while the side show carried a Marimba Band and a Guatemalan dwarf.²⁷



Frank Hoffman became a doctor when Strobridge printed this poster of his illusions in 1892 or 1893. Cincinnati Art Museum Collection.

The 1890 season opened to big business at Bristol, Pennsylvania and despite a number of rainy days it was found necessary to add two new fifty foot middle pieces to the tent. As the show moved up into New England, it played through Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and by September was in Virginia, heading for Georgia. When the show played Atlanta on October 24, it appeared on the same lot as Barnum and Bailey had on October 15 and 16. However the circus was in trouble, for on Monday, October 27 the show was in the hands of the authorities.

A number of the performers had attachments against the show, fearing they would not get money due them if the show closed early. A few days later it was reported that the show's managers settled with all those concerned for 50 cents on a dollar. The show closed the season in Atlanta and secured a winter quarters by renting the Exposition grounds.²⁸

Professor Hoffman continued to present the Hall of Illusions on the 1890 Barnum and Bailey Circus. The circus opened the season in New York City under canvas at 110th Street and Fifth Avenue, and featured the Black Arts Illusions. It was also noted that at the circus a "number of new features await the old folks, who will go tonight on the children's account, among them being an illusion which was secured in Paris during the trip abroad."²⁹

The *Brooklyn Eagle* commented, "The crowds who attended the opening night of the circus filled every seat under the big top and hundreds were turned away. One report claimed . . . those who came early viewed the menagerie before they went to the main tent. There were cages of animals all around the tent and the big fellows—elephants, camels, etc.—in the center. A team of very large

white dromedaries probably drew around the most admiring crowd, and the monkey cage, as usual, attracted many...the new illusion proved a mystery to all the visitors and few were able to solve the old ones."³⁰

The 1890 Barnum and Bailey route book documented the Illusion Department, noting it contained "a collection of the latest and most wonderful deceptions." These modern mysteries were under the direction of Frank Hoffman, assisted by his wife and their daughter Hilda Hoffman. The illusions on exhibit were presented by the following: Magenta, Goddess of the Seas, Miss Maude Allington; Galatea, Mrs. Frank Hoffman; Omega, Miss Maude Westfield; Diana, Miss Carrie Dunbar; Fatima, Miss Amy Austin; La Sybill, Miss Hilda Hoffman; Thaumia, Miss Lillian Bennett.

Hoffman took an ad in the back of the 1890 route book, the catch phrase of which was, "The Art of Pleasing Is That of Deceiving." The Hoffmans were not only responsible for the Black Tent illusions, but were a concert feature that year. After the circus performance the concert with its own nine piece band provided music for the acts. There was a male impersonator, a song and dance duo, comedy sketch artists, a champion clog dancer, and a tambourine soloist. The concert was concluded with the Hoffmans' act, called Hypnota, "The Marvelous Psycho-Psychological Séance." Not much is known about how the act worked, but it was also featured on a Hood trade card.³¹

The Barnum and Bailey Circus opened the 1891 season at Madison Square Garden and then opened the tenting season in Brooklyn. The show again featured Black Art Illusions under canvas and the illusion department presented by Professor Hoffman included the following: Thaumia, Miss Carrie Mortimer; Sybil, Miss Emily Palmer; Fatima, Miss Nellie Mordecai; La Aphrodite, Miss Eva Hill; Diana, Miss Carrie Classon; and Rhoda, Miss Rose Lee.

The Hoffman illusions even made their way into the route book poetry section:

"The Greatest Show On Earth"

Some poets sing in praise of all the splendors of the past,
And seem to think that modern times by ancient are outclassed;
But if the classic heroes could have lived in our to-day,
To visit Barnum's circus, why, I wonder what they'd say!
I fancy 'tis a theme that fully merits being sung,
On v'ry hand, in ev'ry land, in ev'ry modern language,
So here I take the pleasure of attesting to the worth,
Of Barnum & of Bailey and their Greatest Show on Earth...
There's some wonderful illusions in a room of magic shown,
Which somehow simply dwarfs all the museum's ever known;
There's 'Thaumia' and 'The Bottle Imp,' 'Pygmalion's Dream'
and 'She,'

With innumerable mysteries quite marvelous to see.
The senses are bewildered and the startling 'Witch's Head,'
The 'Mermaid' on whose origin no light has been shed.
Of curious surprises in this room there is no dearth
And yet 'tis but a corner in the Greatest Show on Earth!"

The concert program featured an eight piece orchestra providing the music for the shirt dancer, sketch artists, serio-comic artist, black face comedian, and other dancers. As in the previous year, Hoffman concluded the concert with Hypnota, The Marvelous Physio-Psychological Séance.³²

By 1892 the Supernatural Illusions was considered one of the drawing cards of the show. It ranked right up there with the menageries, museums, queer animals, circus in three rings, performances on

THE BEST CONCERT AND VARIETY PROGRAMME

Given under this same canvas immediately
after the spectacular show is con-
cluded. Read the names.

The Great Zittella

Male Impersonator.

MATT FLYNN

Irish Comedian.

THE SHERIDANS

Greatest of Dancers and Musical Artists.

The Whitten Sisters

Sketch Artists.

DICK SANDS

Champion Clog Dancer.

BURT RANSOM

Tambourine Soloist. And many others that go
to make up a good show.

CONCLUDING WITH THE MARVELOUS

HYPNOTA

Psycho-Psychological Seance. Never Pre-
viously Illustrated.

SOMETHING NEW. STAY AND SEE IT.

What P. T. Barnum Says "I cheerfully
commend the
Concert performance as a very meritorious addi-
tion to our show."

"It Is a Fact,"

That Hood's Sarsaparilla does cure scrofula,
salt rheum, and other diseases arising from
impure state or low condition of the blood, over-
comes that tired feeling, creates a good appetite,
cures dyspepsia and sick headache, and gives
strength to every part of the system. Try it.

The Hoffmans performed the Hypnota act in the 1890 Barnum and Bailey concert. It was apparently a hypnotizing trick. Hypnota is the name of an evil force that battles Wonder Woman in the current comic books. Author's Collection.

two stages, hippodrome, and the spectacle of *Columbus and the Discovery of America*. Beneath the acres of canvas was the special black tent with its special attraction. One Chicago reporter stated that there were a "number of clever illusions, showing sirens swinging in aerial revels, or nesting half hidden in immense bouquets."³³

The 1893 Madison Square Garden opening saw a reduction in size of the Illusion Department, and a change in its location. Circus patrons could find the "two menageries, the curious animal freaks, and the magic illusions, all of which are in the basement of the

that in addition to curious animals and odd quadrupeds in the menagerie there were new vaudeville entertainers to delight the patrons. Included were male and female magicians, jugglers, dancers, fire kings, lightning human calculators, snake charmers, the famous Orissa twins, a Giantess nearly nine feet tall, a midget and other living curiosities.

There were two magical venues on the circus lot that year. The vaudeville entertainers were located on stages in the menagerie providing a short entertainment for the passing crowds. On stage was Balbroma the Fire King; Sol Stone, the lightning calculator; Mlle Zora, a female magician; and the Rodneys performing a decapitation act along with magic tricks.³⁶

Over in the side show tent was the magician John G. Scheidler (1866-1902), the King of Cards. In 1876 he published a book called *The Art of Conjuring Simplified*. It explained conjuring, fire eating, ventriloquism, sword swallowing, mind reading, mesmerism, hypnotism, and Punch and Judy. Scheidler also taught magic lessons and one of his pupils was John Lawrence McKissock (1869-1964), who learned his first magic trick from the King of Cards, which was to place four balls under hats and finally produce a glass of beer or an orange from under each hat.³⁷

At the end of the 1897 tenting season the Barnum & Bailey Circus sailed across the Atlantic to present a great show to the people of the United Kingdom. Among the attractions were illusions presented by Henry Roltair (1853-1910).

Roltair was born in England in 1853, immigrated to the United States in 1870 and worked for the magician Hermann the Great. He returned to England then booked steerage passage on board the S. S. Greece in 1877 from Liverpool to New York. Upon arriving in New York on July 10 he listed his age as twenty-five and his occupation as conjurer. For the months of September and October of 1877 Henry Roltair, The Unequalled Magician performed at the New York Aquarium. By February, 1878 he worked with Professor Goldberg at his magic studio at 11 West 26th Street in New York City, as a teacher of sleight of hand, card tricks, and second sight.³⁸

Harry Roltair, as he was also known, went on the road in 1879 with Cooper & Bailey's Great London Circus. He performed as The Wizard in the concert, and as the Man of Mystery in the museum. The 1881 and 1882 seasons found him as an illusionist in the side show of the Sells Bros. Circus, and a magician on the 1883 Adam Forepaugh Circus.

The idea of a challenge appealed to Roltair and in March of 1884 he formed a partnership with Al E. Richards at Columbus, Ohio to open Richards & Roltair's Dime Museum at 88 North High Street. The "theatatorium" had a beautiful little theatre, easy chairs, elegant wallpaper, a charming orchestra, handsome drop curtains, and a neat stage. Arrangements were made for part of the building to be used in the production of illusions and screen views. Upstairs there

RICHARDS & ROLTAIR'S

NEW

DIME MUSEUM!

88 NORTH HIGH STREET.

LOOK AT THE LIST OF ATTRACTIONS:

MRS. GEN. TOM THUMB!

THE
SUTHERLAND
SISTERS,
SEVEN IN
NUMBER!

VICTORIA, hair 6 ft. 4 inches long.

GRACIE, hair 7 feet in length.


ISABEL, hair 6 feet long.

NAOMI, hair 6 feet long, 6 inches thick.

DORA, hair 6 feet 8 inches.

MARY, hair 7 ft long.

SARAH, with curls of great length and profusion.



MAJOR NEWELL, Skatatorial Artist. ROLTAIR, the Prestidigitateur.

ORMOND, the Tattooed Man.

THE LOVENBERGS (Charles and Lena), in Musical Specialties.

LITTLE ESTELLE, the Great Child Artist.

THE BEAUTIFUL ALBINO CHILDREN, Henry and Maud Lynch

THIS UNPARALLELED LIST OF ATTRACTIONS WILL BE PRESENTED TO THE PUBLIC

MONDAY, APRIL 7th, 1884.

ADMISSION 10 CENTS. ALL SEATS IN THEATORIUM, 5 CENTS.

When the new Dime Museum opened in April, 1884 in Columbus, Ohio, Henry Roltair was listed as the prestidigitator along with a number of sideshow attractions. Ad from Ohio State Journal, April 5, 1884. Author's Collection.

building."³⁴

In addition to being moved for the New York City opening, the Illusion Department was down sized. The following illusions were listed in the route book: Cupid, Hattie Palmer; Aphrodite, Violet Dilke; Electra, Nellie Palmer. Two stand ins were listed, Johanna Sayres and Nellie Hagreen.

As for the concert an eight piece orchestra played for the comedy sketch artists, the song and dance artists, the musical comedians, and the Parisian Dancers. Frank and Zarita Hoffman presented the Mysterious Cabinet Séance, but did not close the after show. At season's end, after almost a decade on the Barnum and Bailey Circus, the Hoffmans left the show.³⁵

For the 1897 season the Barnum & Bailey Circus advertised

were four cases containing twenty-six cosmorama or screen views which were perspective pictures of different world landmarks.

When Richards & Roltair's Dime Museum opened April 7, 1884 it featured a number of sideshow attractions. For a very short time the citizens of Columbus had the opportunity of shaking hands some famous little artists. There was Mrs. General Tom Thumb, the little lady who "has charmed the potentates and plebeians of Europe, and in fact the whole world." The public could also shake hands with Major Newell, only twenty-seven inches high, along with Little Estelle, and the tattooed man.³⁹

Roltair managed the Dime Museum when Richards went on the road ahead of the W. W. Cole Circus as press agent. Richards returned to the Museum in September, and in October formed a partnership with J. E. Sackett of Cleveland. Sackett had a chain of enterprises such as the Drew & Sackett Dime Museum in Cleveland, the Harris Dime Museum in Cincinnati, and the Kohl and Middleton Dime Museums in Chicago and Milwaukee.

Roltair migrated from the heart of Ohio to the state's north coast where the Toledo Dime Museum with Roltair and Stone as proprietors took shape in August of 1884. The White Theatre was transformed into Toledo's newest attraction with a seating capacity of 1,200. When it opened to the public on Monday September 1, 1884, Roltair was still advertising for good curiosities.⁴⁰

After working in his dime museum Roltair decided to return to the road. In July, 1886 he was billed as the King of Magic, returning for one week only to Sackett and Wiggins' Mammoth Amusement Palace in Saint Paul, Minnesota. November, 1887 found him in Fort Worth at the State Fair and Dallas Exposition. It was in the Lone Star State that Professor Roltair presented a living, breathing head of a child without a body and his wonderful living mermaid.

Roltair's next achievement was in September, 1888 when he created a Palace of Illusions for the International Industrial Exposition held at Buffalo. In 1889 his illusions were featured at the Grand Street Museum in New York City, owned by the old circus man John B. Doris. For three months he displayed three illusions, the Living Mermaid, Rolla, and Blue Beard. He was engaged in 1889 by the Pittsburgh Exposition Company to present his Palace of Illusion where large crowds found his unusual attractions unique. In April, 1891 at the Omaha, Nebraska Dime Eden Musee, Roltair was billed as the "king of card manipulators," and Mrs. Roltair presented her musical glasses.

By the fall of 1891, Roltair's Palace of Illusion was erected in Honolulu. A reporter for the *Hawaiian Gazette* on October 20 recounted the opening night on the island: "As early as half-past six the crowd commenced to gather, the doors opened soon after and the people poured in until the tent was crowded. The inside of the canvas is tastefully arranged with booths in which the various illusions are exhibited. They are raised about five feet from the ground, allowing everybody to have an unobstructed view of everything. The large number present were in a good-natured mood, in fact too much so. They would not give the Professor a fair opportunity to explain properly the workings of the mysterious objects occupying the booths. One of the most interesting sights is the water nymph, a pretty young lady in a fountain basin. She disappears and reappears; it keeps the audience guessing where she goes to and from whence she comes. The mythical mermaid is also a cause for wonderment, in fact there are many other mechanical devices that are both instructive and amusing. Professor Roltair amuses the audience with some clever card tricks. The manager has wisely decided not to allow any smoking inside the tent. The

entertainment is adapted for ladies and children and at the very reasonable prices charged the tent should be crowded for the length of their stay which will be one week."⁴¹

The Palace of Illusion opened in Hawaii on October 15. The Sells Brothers Circus had just completed its tour of the United States and on October 17 sailed from San Francisco. The show was on its way to Australia and when it reached Hawaii Roltair, his wife, daughter and Palace of Illusion joined the circus.

After a twenty-eight day voyage across the Pacific Ocean the troop reached Sydney. On November 19, 1891 the Sells Brothers opened with an enormous display of acrobats, feats of daring and wild animals under a big top 370' in length by 185' in width. Professor Roltair's canvas tent was set up on the midway and a separate admission was charged for the Palace of Illusions. A Sydney newspaper critiqued his presentation: "The annexes comprise not only that embracing the menagerie, but also a large pavilion which has been artistically filled up as a palace of illusions by Mr. Roltair, the inventor of what is to be seen there. This pavilion is formed so as to present to the audience nine bays or recesses. Each of these discloses either an animated headless trunk, a head or a bust. In the majority of cases the heads or busts are those of women. Looking into one of the recesses one sees a living head resting upon a shelf, the surroundings being such as to suggest that the head is complete in itself. In another recess there were the head and body of a lady resting upon a fountain in such a way as to suggest that the lady had anything more than head, arms, and body. From time to time this lady mysteriously disappears, and as mysteriously reappears, the audience being completely bewildered in trying to account for the phenomenon."⁴²

The 1892 Sells Brothers route book noted that Roltair's illusions with Professor Harry Roltair as manager and R. Thompson, the door tender, were part of the show. The illusions presented were: The Water Nymph, Miss Roltair; The Mermaid, Miss Austin; A Safe Place, Miss Clark; Sphinx, Miss Stone; Swinging Head, Miss White; Sliding Bust, Miss Laurie; Half Lady, Miss Bright; Headless Man, George Brown; The Spider, Miss Wilson.

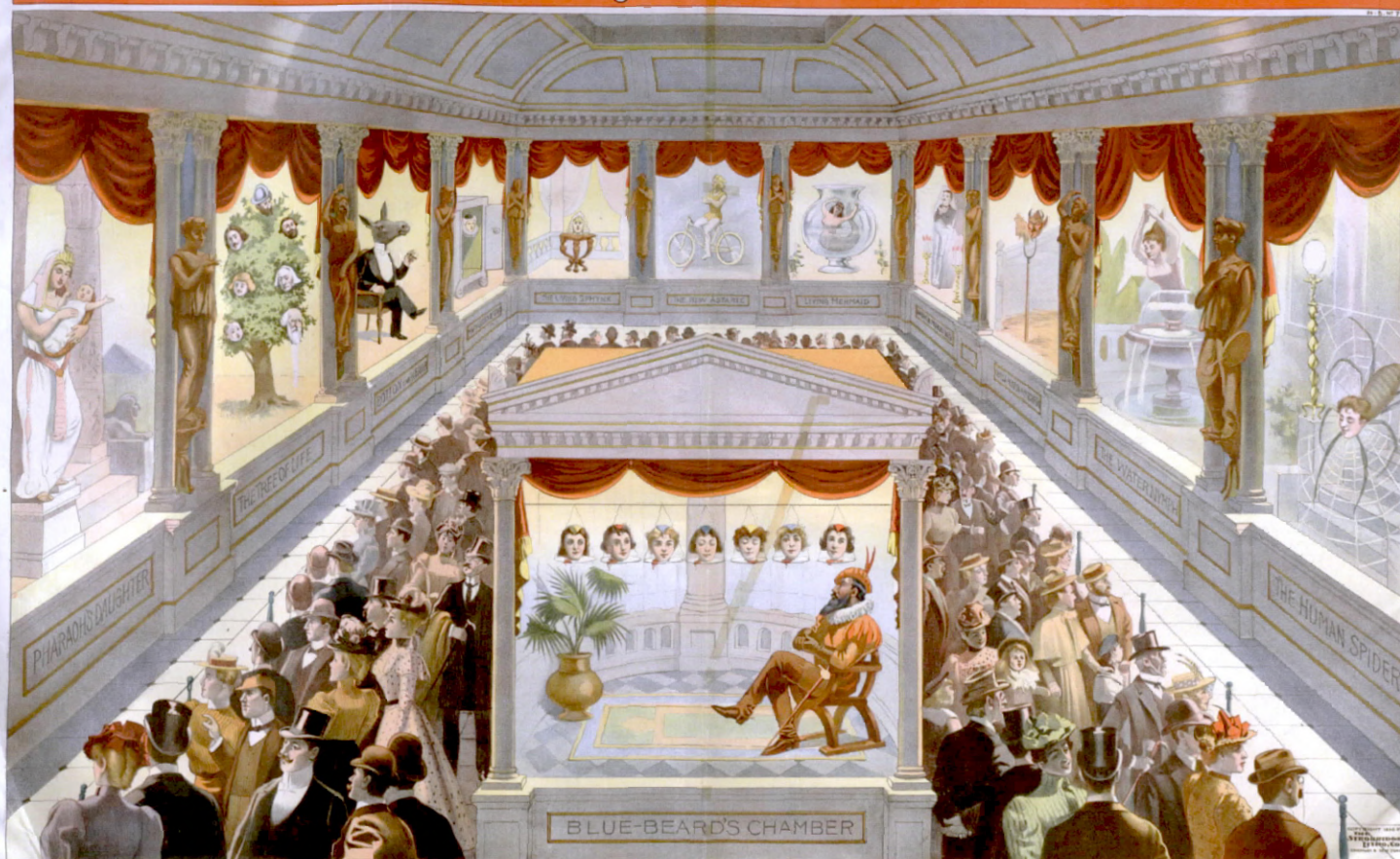
Out of all the illusions, Professor Roltair has only been credited with the creation of The Spider or the Spidora Illusion in which the head of a woman grows from the body of a huge spider. After a year in Australia with the Sells Brothers Circus, Roltair returned to the United States.⁴³

In 1894 another illusion was created by Roltair. The illusion was the Pharaoh's Daughter and it was presented at the San Francisco Mid Winter Fair. The illusion presented a young lady in the bull rushes finding the baby Moses in a basket. She gradually turned into a marble statue which was known as The Flower Girl. The other illusions shown in the Egyptian building at the Mid Winter Fair included Maid of the Mist, She, Psycho, Ariel, Queen of the Air, Galates, and Luna.⁴⁴

The Palace of Illusion was exhibited across the country and was a feature of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition at Nashville from May to October, 1897. After the Tennessee Exposition closed Roltair was hired by James A. Bailey, who first employed him on his 1879 circus. The Barnum and Bailey Circus toured England after the 1897 season ended and Bailey decided that it was time to recreate his black tent illusions.

On various stages around the perimeter, the circus patrons could see such sights as the Devil's Head on a Pitchfork, depicting Satan's head balanced on one prong. There was the Tree of Life showing a number of male heads from children to old men in the branches.

The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth



CHASTE, CHARMING, WEIRD & WONDERFUL SUPERNATURAL ILLUSIONS, ASTONISHING MAGICAL ACHIEVEMENTS VIVIDLY PRODUCED. LIVING & BREATHING HEADLESS BODIES, TALKING HUMAN HEADS, REVOLVING SPRITES, BEAUTIFUL MERMAIDS, GRUESOME GNOMES & CURIOUS FLYING PEOPLE, CREATED BY ROLTAIR, THE MAGICIAN.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST, GRANDEST, BEST AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION

When the Barnum and Bailey Circus played London's Olympia over the winter of 1897-1898, James Bailey reinstituted many of Frank Hoffman's illusions that had previously appeared under the black tent. Henry Roltair was hired to present the illusions, including one called *Spidora*, which he is credited as creating. This Strobridge one sheet dates from 1898. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Howard Tibbals Collection.

The Living Sphinx had a head wearing a pharaoh's headdress upright on a table. The Living Mermaid was in a large glass bowl, while the Water Nymph showed the upper half of a woman splashing in a fountain. Even Roltair's own creation, the Human Spider, was featured among the clever illusions.

The center of the attraction held Blue-Beard's Chamber in which the noted "ladies man" sat admiring seven female heads on suspended shelves. One review noted that this centerpiece had a strange effect on the ladies when Blue Beard's Chamber was shown at Barnum and Bailey's Circus. The dripping red liquid beneath the heads, fed by rubber tubes, was too much for some viewers. One report noted that Roltair found that in ninety minutes a half a dozen ladies had fainted at the gruesome sight. When he went to the show's owner and asked him what he was to do the reply came back, "Let them faint, That's what I want."⁴⁵

It is doubtful that the black tent of illusions was part of Barnum and Bailey's 1898 tour of England. After the Barnum show opened at the Olympia, Roltair went on to other venues. In 1898 he opened the Electric Scenic Palace at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha. He appears to have returned to the Barnum show for the second London winter engagement from December 26, 1898 to April 8, 1899. At the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, France he came up with the idea of the Upside Down House with a number of illusions in the lower level. Roltair provided attractions at the 1901 Pan American International Exhibition in Buffalo, New York, the St. Louis World Fair in 1904, and Dreamland at New York's Coney Island before he passed on in 1910.

For almost two decades the Barnum & Bailey Circus was involved in the use of magic and illusions at multiple venues on the circus lot. It was the heyday of the black tent where the strange and unusual were on exhibit for all to see. Once the circus entered the new century the black tent housed new illusions as moving pictures in them. This is not to say that magic and illusion left the circus but rather that it never again achieved the heights that P. T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, Professors Hoffman and Roltair brought it under the black tent. BW

After attending a performance of the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus in Elyria, Ohio in 1970, John Polacsek began collecting circus routes. The information he gleaned from early newspapers culminated in his M.A. thesis on the history of the circus and menagerie in Ohio prior to 1860. He is a retired curator of maritime history at the Detroit Historical Department, and has been tracing circuses that traveled the waterways of America by boat.

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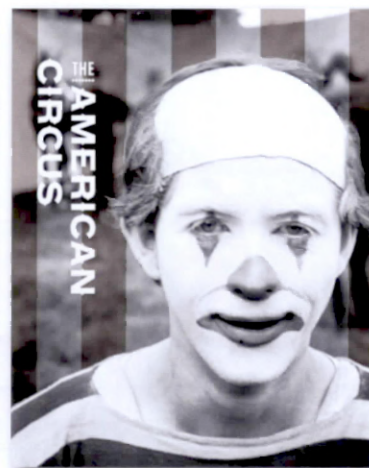
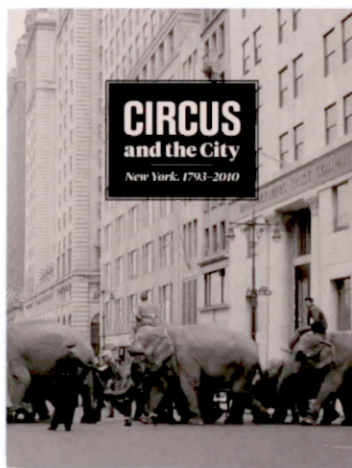
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THANKS FOR A STUPENDOUS SUMMER
AND BEST WISHES FOR A
WONDERFUL HOLIDAY SEASON FROM
CIRCUS WORLD!



The Flying LaVans of Bloomington, Illinois

by Steve Gossard

In the mid-1870s Fred and Howard Green (sometimes spelled Greene) formed an aerial act in Bloomington, Illinois that they called the LaVan Brothers. Unlike most "brothers" acts formed by unrelated professional athletes, Fred and Howard actually were brothers. Their father, John L. Green, was listed in the 1870-1871 Bloomington city directory as "J. L. Green and Timerman wholesale and retail dealers in fruit, confectionary, nuts, cigars, tobacco, &cet. 104 N. Main." John Green must have owned a number of acres on what was then the edge of town, because years later Fred and Howard's younger brother Harry stated that he first trained himself to perform on hoe handles strung across the rafters of their father's barn.

Older brother Fred was born March 2, 1858 and Howard on October 22, 1865, making them about nineteen and twelve years old, respectively, when they began performing. A Bloomington newspaper article published nearly six decades after the event declared that Fred and Howard began working in 1877, but the earliest professional-level mention of the LaVan Brothers is a simple, mid-1878 trade advertisement placed by the Pullman and Hamilton Show: "Two gymnasts who can do a bar act, and contortion business, the LaVan Brothers are requested to communicate." One would assume that the LaVan act had been working for some time since Pullman & Hamilton solicited a communication from them. Following this card the LaVans advertised for work on August 3, 1878: "The Double Horizontal-Bar Champions and Double-Trapeze Artists are arranging dates, and would be pleased to hear from managers. Permanent address, P. O. Box 1196, Bloomington, Ill."¹

Local legend in Bloomington holds that the LaVan brothers had heard of an act performed by the Hanlon brothers in Europe called a "passing act," or a "double flying bar act," and they tried to copy this performance, sight unseen (see Appendix for definitions of various aerial performances). The double flying bar act employed a rigging similar to the flying bar act, which was introduced to the United States in the 1860s by the likes of Jules Leotard and William Hanlon. Leotard, who was reputed to have invented the art of "flying," employed two or three trapeze bars in succession, and performed tricks as he swung from one trapeze to the next. This was the act that William Hanlon called the "Zampillaerostation." In the double flying bar act two performers swung off from opposite ends of the rigging and passed one another, performing tricks in opposite directions. The LaVans, it was claimed, were the first passing act (double flying bar act) to perform in America. It was further claimed that Fred and Howard had derived the name of



Harry LaVan, Fred's younger brother, about 1900. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

"LaVan" from a transmutation of their mother's maiden name of "Van Alstine." In fact, according to his passport application of 1917, younger brother, Harry's middle name was Van Alstine.² Unfortunately, the historical record does not support these claims.

The originators of the double flying bar act were the Rizarelli Brothers from Spain. They first performed in America in 1868, almost ten years before the LaVan brothers act was formed. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the LaVans were even performing this act in 1878. A double horizontal bar act is a performance on stationary bars, not trapeze; and what is called a double trapeze act generally refers to an act performed with one trapeze bar hanging above another, not a series of trapeze bars in a row. Since various sources state that the Green brothers practiced using hoe handles in the hay loft of their father's barn, it is most likely that the LaVan brothers began by performing on stationary bars, not trapeze. As for deriving the name "LaVan" from the name "Van Alstine," this requires a stretch of the imagination. A number of other acts

were performing in the 1870s which employed similar names, notably the Lavantines and the Levanions. The Lavantine Brothers, in particular, are found performing in Bloomington with the New York Circus in 1870 and 1871. It is likely that Fred and Howard selected a name that sounded like other popular acts of the time.³

The eminent circus historian C. G. Sturtevant provided an overview of the stationary bar act in "Can You Do Bars" in the December 1936-January 1937 *White Tops*. He stated that the practice of stationary bar exercises dated to the ancient Greeks and Romans. In Europe and America the bars became popular in the nineteenth century. The first horizontal bar apparatus consisted of two upright posts supporting a round cross bar about 1¼" or 1½" in diameter and about six



Fred LaVan, nee Green, about 1890. McCaddon Collection of Barnum and Bailey Circus, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

feet long. It could be raised or lowered to a required distance from the ground. Charlie Winter was the first single bar performer in America, appearing on Welch's Circus in 1852. When high aerial bars were introduced in 1891 by Petit, McVey and Ryan they were 28 feet above the ground on suspended frames with the net about 10 feet above the ground. A pedestal reached by a rope ladder was part of the rigging and placed a convenient distance from the starting bar.

None other than the great Alfredo Codona had this to say about stationary bar performances in the Christmas 1938 *White Tops*: "The 'art' of bar to bar . . . flying is . . . far more strenuous and exacting than [flying] to a catcher. . . . If he works to a catcher there is a definite degree of elasticity, but where he has to finish by grasping an ashwood bar with a steel core his difficulties are enormously enhanced. . . ." Untutored novices that they were, Fred and Howard must have had a great natural aptitude for this work.

It is not known where the LaVans found work in 1878. They have not been found among the rosters of circus personnel listed in the *New York Clipper* that year, but they were working with

the Van Amburgh & Co. Circus in 1879 performing "Horizontal Bar and Trapeze."⁴ In 1880 they were listed with James L. Thayer's Great Show and United Aggregation in April, performing on triple horizontal bars. While they were performing on stationary bars that year, an ad appeared in the *Clipper* illustrating the team of Hawley and Buislay, "California's Winged Meteors," obviously performing a double flying bar act on trapeze. Though the LaVans might have made the switch from stationary bars to swinging trapeze, the transition would have posed a substantial problem because of the complex timing involved in passing and exchanging bars with the double flying bar act.

Several performers on the roster of Robert Stickney's circus in 1880 are important to note at this point. An ad had appeared in the *Clipper* in 1879 for "Fredericks and Bliss Bros., Great American Athlete. . . . Acts consisting of great balancing ladders (entirely new and original), Horizontal Bar, Brother Act, entitled Ladder of Life. Address care W. E. Blair, 173 East Madison St., or 173 South Clark St., Chicago." The roster for Stickney's circus in 1880 included Mr. Fredericks performing a single trapeze act. "Roman Ladders" were performed by "Clifton and the G[l]oss Brothers," and triple horizontal bar by Miss Fredericks, G[l]oss and Clifton. The James L. Thayer show in August included performers Clifton and Gloss, and "Con. Fredericks." The *Clipper* noted that "Con. Fredericks the trapeze artist, who is with the show, met with a serious accident in Tamaqua, Pa., July 16. The trapeze bar became detached from the rope, and Con. fell thirty-five feet to the ground, sustaining serious injuries. He is alright now, however, and hopes shortly to be able to resume his position. . . ."

It was later reported that "Fredericks, Gloss and Frank Clifton have left Robert Stickney's Circus and joined Dr. James L. Thayer's. . . ." The Thayer circus in 1880 must have had its share of accidents, for Howard Green also fell while performing with that show in Indianapolis that year, and at the age of fifteen he retired from the profession.⁵

The Three Russian Athletes

At this point Fred Green joined Fredericks and Gloss to form an act that they called the Three Russian Athletes. The choice of this name has led to speculation that Fred was Russian, that he worked with Russians, or that he trained with Russians. There has been no evidence found that Fredericks, Gloss or LaVan were ever connected with any Russian individual, but, like the name, LaVan itself, the name for their new troupe was probably derived from that of another well-known act.

Though Fred Green's obituary later stated that Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan were the first to perform the act called Roman Ladders, balancing ladders performances were found in the United States as early as 1845, and an illustration of just such an act was featured in the *Daily Pantagraph* for Levi J. North's National Circus in Bloomington in 1856.⁶ Whether or not Roman Ladders was different in some way from other balancing ladders acts is not known. At any rate, Fred, we are told, worked as the top mounter for this act.

On April 16, 1881 an ad for Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan, Russian Athletes, "who do a dancing Roman ladder-act and general business," ran in the *New York Clipper*. It was reported April 30 that they closed with Mack Forester's Combination April 23, and opened with Coup's Circus in Boston on April 25. They were reportedly at Hyde and Beaman's Theatre in Brooklyn in May, and with the Batcheller and Doris Circus doing ladders on June 4. A reporter for the *Clipper* stated, "The performance of the Russian Athletes on the ladders surpassed anything we ever saw," with Batcheller and Doris. Obviously, his first year with the Russian Athletes, Fred LaVan caused something of a sensation. The *Clipper* reported later that month, "The performance last evening was enlarged by the addition of the Russian Athletes, whose performance on the ladders was marvelous and heartily encored."⁷

The Con. Fredericks of the trio may have been William Fredericks, who had been listed in 1874 as a rider and acrobat with John H. Murray's Great Railroad Circus "from London, England, his first time appearance in America," or he may have been the "Champion

Globe Runner" who advertised in the *Clipper* on December 19, 1874.⁸

The historical record grows somewhat confusing at this point, because there was more than one act calling itself Russian Athletes. "The Royal Russian Athletes from St. Petersburg are with the Batcheller and Doris Famous Interoccean Show," the *Clipper* reported on August 6. The *Clipper* reported December 24 and 31 that the Russian Athletes "depart Ward's Opera House in River Fall, Mass., Dec. 24 and go to the Academy of Music in Pittsburg (sic), Pa. Dec. 26." It is difficult to say if these references were to Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan; or if they referred to the act called the Royal Russian Athletes or the Great Russian Athletes.

In January of 1882 an ad for the 3 Royal Russian Athletes, Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan, "acknowledged Champion Trick Ladder Performers and Balancers of the Entire World" appeared in the *New York Clipper*. It stated: "These artists closed the old year at



Harry LaVan, left, wife Amy LaVan, and Charles Weitzel, 1896. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

Harry Miner's Eighth-avenue Theatre and opened the New Year at the Palace Globe Theatre, Boston, Jan. 2, for two weeks, with Kiralfy Brothers' Black Crook Co." They appeared at Smith's Bijou Theatre in Indianapolis in February, then moved to the Academy of Music in Chicago, and to the Coliseum in Cincinnati in March. They were back in Chicago at the Lyceum Theatre in April. After a brief illness Fred opened the circus season with the Three Russian Athletes, once again with the Batcheller and Doris Circus.⁹

The trio, now calling themselves the Royal Russian Athletes, opened the 1883 circus season with the John B. Doris Great Interocean Double Ring Circus April 9 in Philadelphia. They were said to be, "very good in a novel ladder act." Con Fredericks was also working as a clown with the show.¹⁰

An ad for the act ran in the *New York Clipper* in January of 1884 in "their original copyrighted Roman Specialty. The undisputed Champion Triple Trick-ladder Performers, Climbers and Balancers of The World, now in their nineteenth week of Tremendous Success as one of the principal features of the Howard Athenaeum Star Specialty Company. . . . In their original copyrighted Roman specialty. The undisputed Champion Triple Trick Ladder Performers, Climbers and Balancers of The World . . . one of the principal features of the Howard Athenaeum Star Specialty Company." In February it was reported that "Fredericks and Gloss, two of the Russian Athletes, while returning to their home from the National Theatre, Philadelphia, night of Jan. 31, were stopped by two ruffians, who demanded money. The athletes, feeling in good condition, gave the footpads a severe thrashing." The Barnum and Bailey Circus often employed extra acts to reinforce its opening performances in Madison Square Garden, and the Three Royal Russian Athletes worked three weeks with the show in March of 1884, after which they toured the regular tenting season with the Sells Brothers' Circus.¹¹

In 1885 Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan again opened March 16 with the Barnum show for three weeks performing a High Russian Ladder Act. The Fisher Brothers, also of Bloomington, Illinois, were with the show as well. The Brothers LaVan were listed with the Burr Robbins Circus later in the month. Following that, the Three Russian Athletes were at Hyde and Beaman's Theater in Brooklyn, and opened with the John B. Doris Circus April on 17 in Indianapolis.¹²

Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan again opened with the Barnum Circus in March of 1886. The Russian Athletes probably toured Europe the rest of the year. According to an article in the *McLean County Community News* of September 9-15, 1992 Fred Green toured with the Royal Russian Athletes doing Roman Ladders in the United States and Europe until 1888, when he joined his younger brother, Harry in the new LaVan Brothers act again.¹³

February 1887 found the Russian Athletes performing at the Royal Cambridge Theatre in London, England. In April, they were with Lowande and Hoffman Mexican Pavilion. Fred's mother, Harriet Green, died on November 18. Her obituary stated that "Fred Green, now in London, is a celebrated athlete, as is also brother, Harry, who is now in the south with Barnett's [S. H. Barrett's] circus. Both these young men are known throughout the United States as the LaVan Brothers, noted athletes."¹⁴

Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan are next found at the Scotia Music Hall at Glasgow, Scotland in March of 1888, but after closing at the Hippodrome in Paris they soon dissolved their partnership. "Fred

LaVan is now in this country, and has joined hands with his brother, Harry," the *Clipper* reported April 24, 1888. "They are to be known under the team name of the Brothers LaVan, aerialists." Fred's obituary later stated that he had also worked with the great bar artist, Harry Van Auken at some time. Just when Fred had joined Van Auken is not known.¹⁵

The LaVan Brothers

Fred's brother, Harry Green, was born in 1867. Various sources claimed that Harry ran away from home in 1883 or 1885 when his father broke up the makeshift rigging that he had built in the rafters of his barn. Harry may have joined out with the Sells Brothers Circus. In "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *White Tops*, September-October 1950, Clyde Noble stated that Harry had worked for some time with Clyde's brother, Charles Noble, as the LaVan Brothers but this act broke up when he was joined by brother, Fred. At age 21, Harry worked with S. H. Barrett's New United Monster Railroad Shows Racing Carnival in 1887, the last full year that his brother Fred was with the Three Russian Athletes. With the Barrett circus, Harry, working under

the name Levan, performed horizontal bars with partners Primrose, Scott and Sanders. His partner, George Scott, was also listed in Display 18 doing balancing trapeze, and partner Johnnie Sanders performed with trick donkeys in Display 19 of the program. "Comiques" in Display 20 were Primrose and Aymar. This is all that is known of Harry's partners in this act. The personnel of the show included a Willie Green in the stable department, but no one else named Green or LaVan was listed with the show.¹⁶

In 1889 the brothers LaVan signed with the Rose Hill Burlesque Co. "as a strengthening attraction for the larger cities." They were next listed on the roster of Heffron's Great Eastern Circus opening May 20; followed by the Ringling Brothers and Van Amburgh's United Monster Circus, Museum, Menagerie, Roman Hippodrome and Universal World's Exposition Circus. A 1928 article in the *Daily Pantagraph* claimed that the passing act was invented at that time: "This was the first and only act of the kind then before the public and created a sensation when first introduced."¹⁷ As stated earlier,



Tom Kitchen, left, Amy LaVan, and Harry LaVan about 1898. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

this was not true.

Lavan and Vidora were with the Fulford Overland Show early in 1890. The same 1928 *Daily Pantagraph* article confirms that this was the LaVan Brothers act. The identity of Harry's partner, "Vidora," is as yet a mystery. In May an act called the Levans was listed with Hurlburt and Leftwich's Circus. This may have been Harry's former partner Charles Noble, who kept the name LaVan until he joined Fred Miltmore in the Fisher Brothers troupe. Lavan and Vidora were still with Fulford & Co.'s New London Shows in August. A *Clipper* article dated August 2, 1890 stated that "Harry Green, of Phillips 'U. T. C.' Co., No. 2, while on parade at Galva, Ill., Jul. 19, was thrown violently from the bloodhound cage and mangled in a horrible condition. The horses attached to the cage became frightened at a C. B. & Q Railroad train. Mr. Green is slowly recovering, and may be able to rejoin the company in two weeks." Though an interesting coincidence, this must have been someone other than Harry LaVan.¹⁸

The Flying Levans, Fred and Harry, joined the Hurlburt and Leftwich Circus in 1891, touring the western states. Another act, called "LaVan and La Mar," was with the King and Franklin Circus. This was Harry's former partner Charles Noble, and another Bloomington boy named Ed Foreman, who had taken the stage name Ed La Mar.¹⁹

The *Clipper* reported on March 19, 1892 that, "THE LAVAN BROS. go with the Forepaugh Circus, and are now in practice at Bloomington, Ill." The program in the Adam Forepaugh 1892 route book read: "Horizontal Bar Feats and Exercises by the LaVan Bros." and in Display 5, "Fred S. and Harry V. LaVan America's Undisputed Champion and Phenomenal Triple Horizontal Bar Experts in the Latest and Most Difficult Feats Performed with Unrivaled Ease, Grace and Skill." The route book went on to describe them: The Great LeVans, in "Marvelous Mid Air Leaps and Somersaults From One Side of the Vast Canvas to the Other. Their Act is so Daring as to be Death Defying. They are Truly the World's Greatest Aerialists and the Only Acknowledged Superiors to the Hanlon-Volters, whom they Succeed with these Great Shows." At Little Falls, New York, it was reported that the lot was too soft for the tent; "Here we picked out such acts as we could use in a theatre." The show the Forepaugh Circus presented in the opera house in Little Falls included the "LeVans."²⁰

The *Clipper* reported that the LaVan Brothers were "scoring a hit" at the Philadelphia Winter Circus in January of 1893. This circus was run by William O'Dale Stevens and his wife, the celebrated equestrienne Linda Jeal. The LaVans followed for three months with the Orrin Brothers Circus in Mexico City, ending in March. Charles and Minnie LeVan were reportedly with the John Robinson Circus

in 1893. This was Charles Noble and wife Minnie, still using the stage name of "LaVan" since working with Harry Green in 1888. Fred and Harry's LaVan brothers' act is next found on the roster of Lorenzo's New Allied Shows, which opened May 4. Following that they worked with the Robert Hunting Circus. The Hunting route book described the LaVans as, "The Only Act of its Kind in the World. Everybody says so who has seen it. The brothers LaVan, a leading feature of Hunting's Circus, Season of 1893. Aerial passing act par excellence," and "Hazardous Flights in Mid-air from one side of the massive canvas to the other—The Flying LaVans." The Hunting route book also recorded the following incident en route: "The Little Booths [midget trapeze artists] present a very handsome solid gold watch chain to Mr. Harry LaVan." Master Lew Hunting was listed as doing clowning for the LaVan act. The

LaVans appeared in the program in the 18th display doing "hazardous flights in mid-air from one side of the massive canvas to the other." In Babylon, Long Island, New York the Hunting show was struck by "a terrible hurricane" about 7:00 p.m. By November 14, after finishing with Bob Hunting's Circus, the LaVan brothers fulfilled a four week engagement at the Georgia Exposition in Augusta, Georgia.²¹

An ad ran in the *Clipper* in March of 1894 describing the LaVans' act: "The Marvelous Flying

Brothers LaVan, America's Greatest Aerialist. The biggest and most sensational Flying Trapeze Act in the world. Only act of kind in America. Two men leaping, vaulting and somersaulting from one trapeze to another, and passing each other in mid-air. Can be engaged for special engagements, Expositions, Fetes, Summer Resorts and large theatres. Now in second week at Keith's Bijou Theatre, Boston. For open time address Brothers LaVan, 712 N. 39th Street, Pa. [probably an agent's address]."

They again toured with the Robert Hunting Circus in spring of 1894. In May the *Clipper* reported that they would be leaving the Hunting show to tour Europe, but when they left the show in Passaic, New Jersey on May 5 it was to play dates in Philadelphia and Chicago. The Hunting route book reported that when they left the show on May 5, they "were the recipients of handsome umbrellas, gifts from the company." The route book recorded that on May 12, "John Gluck, our former master of properties, left us here to join the Bros. LaVan." The LaVans moved on to the Gollmar Brothers Great Circus and Menagerie, where it was reported that "Mlle. LaVan's wire slide astonishes the natives." Mlle. LaVan was listed in the roster as a "wing dancer." They returned to visit the Robert Hunting show at Oxford in September.²²



Letterhead for the LaVan Brothers passing act with Tom Kitchen and Harry LaVan about 1898. Bloomington, Illinois Public Library Collection.

"The LaVan Bros., Fred, Harry and John, will be with the Great Wallace Circus this season" and "will not go to Europe until next fall," the *Clipper* reported March 30, 1895. "Brother" John may have been John Gluck, who joined the LaVans the previous season, or Rudy Schroeder, who worked with them during this period. Schroeder was well known as a "club swinger," but his general occupation was a barber. With the Great Wallace Show, the LaVans were billed as: "3 Flying Brothers LaVan 3 Vertibable Human Meteors Double Return Act, Pass Double Somersaults as they Fly." The Great Wallace route book noted that they "discontinued to accept a position for the summer at Ludlow Lagoon, Cincinnati. They have been so uniformly courteous and gentlemanly during the connection with the show that we are sorry to see them go." The route book also stated that on May 22, "The LaVans prove the feature of the performance" at Roanoke, Virginia.

When they left the Wallace show in June, they published the following two ads in the *Clipper*: "Open For Engagements. Flying Brothers LaVan, Aerial Gymnasts Extraordinary. Biggest Flying Men Act Before the Public. Famous Passing Somersaults and Original Long Distance Double Somersaults to Catch Hands. Only Act of Kind in America. Write or Wire, Care Hotel Bristol, Sixth Street, Cincinnati, Ohio."

And: "Parks Open for Engagements Summer Outdoor Resorts 3 Flying Brothers LaVan 3 Aerial Gymnasts Extraordinary. Now

Flying acts on Barnum and Bailey in 1908. Top row, Flying Fishers; middle row, Flying LaVans; and front row, Siegrist-Silbon Flying act. Author's Collection.

fulfilling two weeks' engagement, and a big hit at Ludlow Lagoon Park. Only act of kind in America. Biggest flying act before the public. Famous passing somersault and original long distance double to catch hands. Wire or write for time. Care Bristol Hotel, Sixth Street, Cincinnati, Ohio, or N. Y. agents."

Though reported in August 1895 that Fred and Harry were "doing the act of their lives," performing a new act with Bentley's Old Fashioned Country Circus in New York City, they were not listed in the roster after September 14. Fred retired from the circus business due to ill health at the end of that season, and returned to Bloomington. He worked for his father for a short time in the hotel business in Peoria, but as he stated that the work was "distasteful" to him, he returned to Bloomington.²³

In 1896 Harry met and married Amy (or Anna) Bowers. On the occasion of their 50th anniversary the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* quoted Amy as stating, "When I saw Harry swooping through the air I got so flustered I fell off the trapeze." In response Harry said, "I proposed right off but she said she didn't believe in whirlwind courtships, so I had to wait for seven days." Harry continued to work with his wife following Fred's retirement, but at some time before the turn of the century he engaged a new partner and worked as LaVan and Weitzel. This partnership lasted for only a short time. In early 1896, the LaVans flying trapeze act was with Orrin's Circus in Mexico City. Following this, a triple horizontal bar act called LaVan and Videlia was with Rice's Circus Carnival. This was probably Harry and Amy's act. The LaVan flying act followed this, working with the New York City Circus. An ad for Ryan, Weitzel



and Zorella, "Long Distance Aerial Leapers" with Forepaugh Sells for 1897 ran in the December 26 *Clipper*. This was probably Harry's one-time partner, Weitzel. It was also reported that "Mlle Amy and Harry LaVan sailed for Mexico Dec. 19, to join Orrin Bros. Circus."²⁴

In January 1897 George W. Hall Jr.'s Circus and Menagerie included "The LaVon Bros., acrobats," but this was not the LaVan aerial act, because Amy and Harry were still with the Orrin Brothers' Circus in Mexico City in February. They worked fair dates for the Pain's Fireworks Company through the tenting season that year. Their business relationship with the Pain Company continued for many years.

Following his retirement from circus work, Fred Green opened a cigar business in Chicago on May 27, but soon became ill. Fred Green, the original, sensational LaVan brother, died June 14, 1897, probably of complications from asthma. His obituary claimed that Fredericks, Gloss and LaVan had introduced the Roman Ladders act to America. The obit went on to say that the Russian Athletes had spent three years in Europe, traveling in Berlin, Paris, and with Rentz's Circus in Hamburg. Fred joined with Van Auken after returning to the states "the greatest of all bar performers, and they played all the leading vaudeville theaters. . . ."²⁵

The LaVans have not been found working with any circus in 1898. They may have worked on the stage during that year, or spent the time breaking in a new act. This was the year that Harry joined in partnership with Tom Kitchen of Chicago. Kitchen worked with the LaVan act well into the new century, and later performed as Kitchen and Roy, Kitchen and Foy and the Kitchens. He was active in later years training aerialists at the Chicago Health Club; and still later relocated to the west coast, where he trained more aerialists.²⁶

Amy and LaVan were back working with the circus in 1899, listed in the John Robinson Circus route book in Display 11. The Flying LaVans were with the Great Wallace Shows in St. Joseph, Missouri June 27.²⁷

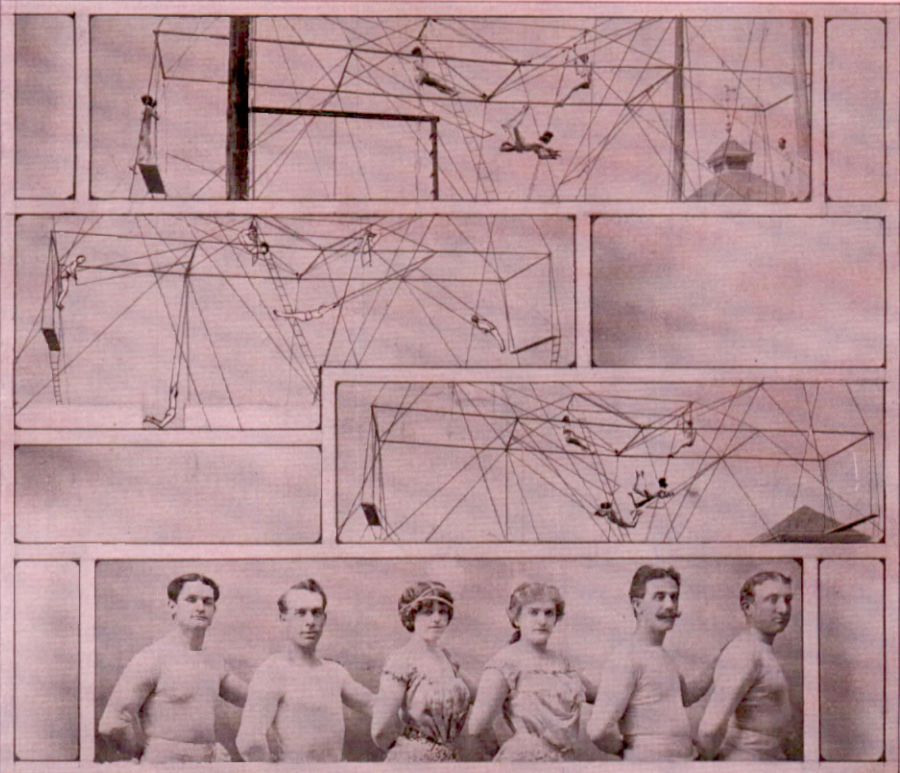
From 1900 to 1902 the LaVans contracted with the John Robinson Circus. In 1900, Robert Kitchen, (no doubt, Tom Kitchen) and Harry Green, were listed in the John Robinson program performing Aerial Bars in display 2, and Amy LaVan was doing

ROBINSON AMUSEMENT CORPORATION

Flying Le Vans

Peerless and Intrepid Aerialists

Giving an Unprecedented Exhibition



The Most Modern and Original Aerial Act Ever Devised!
Perilous Performances
and Mid-Air Somersaults with an Infallibility that
Thrills Spectators to a Degree of
Speechless Amazement

CONSUMERS BUILDING, CHICAGO, ILL.

Page 6

Inexplicably, the LaVan act was called the Flying LeVans in the 1914 catalog published by Ethel Robinson's booking agency in Chicago. Note the complicated rigging used by the act. Pfening Archives.

Flying Rings in display 12. The route book's list of performers included Tom Kitchen, Harry LaVan and "Mlle. Amy."

In 1901 LaVan & Delno performed a double trapeze act in display 4 of the John Robinson Circus, and the Flying LaVans occupied display 15. The 1901 route book of the John Robinson show listed Harry and Amy, and Tom Kitchen on the roster of performers. There are a number of different types of "flying" trapeze acts (see Appendix), and Harry LaVan experimented with virtually every sort of aerial performance over the years. Photographs from the Arnold Riegger collection at Illinois State University picture the LaVans performing a variety of different acts during that period. Therefore,

the acts the LaVans presented at any time in the early part of the century could have been either a passing act or a flying return act. A description of the LaVans' performance in 1902 has not been found. A 1933 *Billboard* article recalled that Tom Kitchen had also performed a "crackerjack" bicycle act in the early 1900s.²⁸

The Flying LaVans were with the Norris & Rowe Circus in 1903 and 1904 with a troupe of five members. Harry continued to expand his act over the next three decades, breaking in at least a dozen new performers. In 1905 they contracted with the Campbell Bros. Shows as the Four Flying LaVans.²⁹

From 1906 to 1907 the LaVans were with the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Circus. They were listed as The Four Fearless LaVans in the 1906 program, Display 4, a "potpourie (sic) of aerial acts-LaVan Brothers, Fisher Brothers, and others;" and in Display 15, "Flying LaVans with Six Fishers and William Tissler."³⁰

In 1908 the Flying LaVans moved to the Barnum and Bailey Circus with two acts listed in the program. In Display 7, the LaVan Trio was described as "A second comedy bar act, as expertly exciting as the first and also bubbling over with happy and humorous extravagances." They were also listed in Display 15: The Flying LaVans, "Absolute daring that arrests and fascinates the eye of the beholder is the feature of this act, replete with sensational and awe inspiring aerial flights. Like wings of supernatural power these artists fly through the air with apparent ease and absence of effort. Nothing seems difficult—nothing impossible, and with every flight there is exhibited a skill, and grace, and defiance of danger that evokes applause."³¹

From 1909 to 1910 they again toured parks and fairs for the Pain Fireworks Company.³² They toured parks and fairs again in 1911, but contracted independently. An ad ran in the *Billboard* June 1 for The LaVan-Haas Troupe, "The Greatest Trampoline Gymnasts and Fun Makers," gave its address as 610 East Taylor Street, Bloomington, Illinois. Harry had teamed up with the Haas troupe to present a stationary bar act that year. During the season of 1912 the Flying LaVon troupe, another name used by the LaVan act, worked with the Heber Bros.' Circus and Wild West show. The LaVans again worked for the Pain Fireworks Company from 1913 to 1915. Harry offered his act to the Ringling Brothers Circus, but was not accepted.³³

About 1915 Western Vaudeville Managers' Association booking catalog described the LaVan's act as the Peerless Flyers, with four men and one woman performing flying return and passing acts with pedestal boards at both ends of the rigging. The catcher was using what was commonly called a "girl's catch bar" in those days. This was a brace used to alleviate the pressure on the knees, caused by the "deadlock" position customarily used by catchers—holding the bar with their hocks entwined in the cables. The LaVans performed "2-Distinct Numbers-2 No. 1-A flying act of thrills, featuring double somersaults, twisters and passing and repassing of these clever artists of the air. No. 2-A fast routine of difficult tricks by three men

and a lady on the aerial rings." The flyers in the troupe included Frank Shepherd, Arnold Riegger and Harold Cassanova. Cassanova was from New Orleans, where he had been trained as a gymnast at the YMCA. Harry hired Cassanova at a salary of \$50 a week. The LaVans were five men and one woman, Amy LaVan. Cassanova later joined the Flying Wards act in Bloomington.

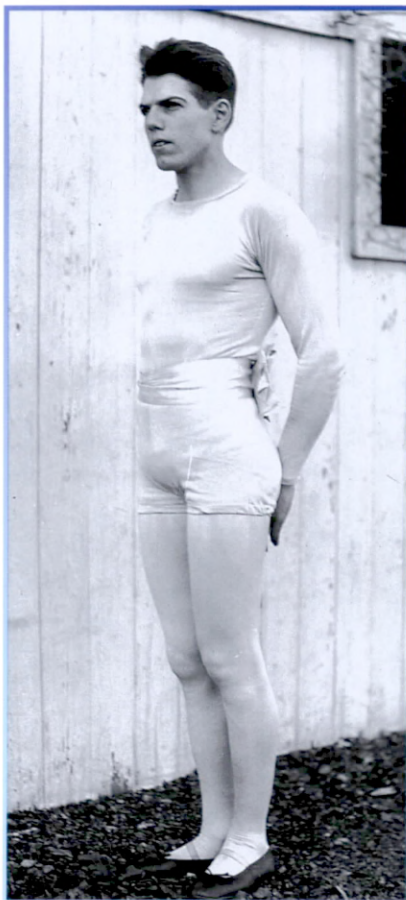
In 1916 the LaVan troupe was with the Great American Fireworks Company. The troupe consisted of Harry and Amy LaVan, Frank Shepherd, Arnold Riegger, Ben Dunham, Walter Dunham and Josie Dunham. In early 1917 the LaVans practiced at the Eddie Ward barn on East Emerson Street. The personnel consisted of: Mr. and Mrs. Harry LaVan; Arnold Riegger; Frank Shepherd of Sandusky,

Ohio; James Hayes of Toledo, Ohio; and Teller Harper of Okmulgee, Oklahoma. "The troupe works on the flying trapeze from two pedestals," a *Bloomington Daily Bulletin* article reported, "there being two trapezes in each end of their rigging. The leapers are passed back and forth between the pedestals or from one back to the other." The article stated that Harry had taught the popular local perch performers, Gene and Mary Enos, and continued teaching other performers. This was a testament not only to Harry's versatility as a performer and trainer, but also to his willingness to share his expertise. According to the city directory, Harry and Amy were residing at 601 E. Olive Street at that time, although his letterhead placed his street address as 610 E. Olive. The LaVans and the Flying Wards, also of Bloomington, toured Cuba that winter, extending the tour through the new year into 1918. Passport applications for Harry and for Arnold Riegger stated that they departed from the port of Tampa November 12 to work for the Santos and Artigas Circus.³⁴

In a correspondence on file at Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University (date indistinct) Harry LaVan offered his act to Charles Ringling: "I am at liberty to furnish you the above flying trapeze act with 5 people—also enclosed Trampoline Bar act 4 people—5 people in all—will furnish you either act or both acts—& [am prepared] to do business with you for any of your shows—if you can place either or both acts please let me hear from you & oblige—with best wishes. . . ."³⁵

In another letter dated August 14, sometime after 1917 to Charles Ringling Harry offered and described his act: "Your letter just received in reply to same. Wish to say we are open to do business for rest season with you & will describe above act as near as possible as you request. I have six people in act. 4 men 2 ladies—I have Ben Dunham and wife, Walter Dunham, Frank Shepherd. This is my second season with the big Six act, & my principal flyer has been with me for 4 years all are artists & have had a great deal of experience. As you know I must have . . . artists to do this act. I will now state the tricks done in act.

"Single tricks: Somersaults, cutaway twisters, half and full twisting back somersaults, forward back somersaults, forwards over-Pierouette [pirouette] some of these tricks are done on opposite



Arnold Riegger about 1915. Arnold Riegger photo. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

(sic) bar.

"Tricks passing all 4 leapers at same time: Seat jumps, crabs (or Birdsnest), straight jumps & half pierouettes [pirouettes], vaults over & under.

"Tricks side by side Bar to Bar: Somersaults, crabs, & straight jumps.

"We finish act with drops & double and triple somersaults to net.

"You ask in letter if we will do any or all of the 3 tricks-you mention full twisting somersault, double piemitte [pirouette] & double somersault or do the full twister and double pierouette [pirouette].

"But I must guarantee the double somersault. [Word unreadable] done it a while this spring, but am working outdoors so I musn't care to guarantee this trick but our side & side tricks are very showy & big looking & I consider this to be the best & most finish act of its kind in America.

"Salary \$250.00 per wk. lowest.

"This act can be seen at these places. . .

"Two weeks Aug. 17-24-Pain's Fireworks Co., Luna Park Cleveland.

"Week Aug. 31st-Interstate Fair, Kankakee, Illinois.

"Sept. 8-9-10-Manson Fair Manson, Iowa.

"Sept. 15-16-17-Menomine-Wis Fair, Menomine Wis.

"Sept. 21-week-Sioux City Fair, Sioux City, Iowa."³⁶

An unattributed Flying LaVans advertisement from about 1920 read: "Six person act features Amy and another woman, Harry, Jim Arbaugh and two other men. The Six Flying Lavans World's Most Marvelous Aerialists The Only Flying Trapeze Act Flying from Bar to Bar. Introducing Cutaways, Twisters, Double Pirouettes, Single, Double and Triple Somersaults. The Premier Aerial Attraction of America Fast Surpassing All Previous Performances by Aerialists. The LaVans promise all and more. LaVans furnish their entire apparatus and poles 40 feet high. The management to furnish 40 pointed hardwood stakes, 3 ft. 6 in. long."³⁷

In 1921 the Flying LaVans were with Howe's Great London Circus. The act consisted of Harry LaVan, Amy LaVan, Frank Shepherd, George Ochaner, W. A. Doner and Arnold Riegger. They opened May 1, playing the big fair circuit, and trained once again at the Ward barn. That winter Harry LaVan fell in practice and dislocated his shoulder. The LaVan troupe in 1922 consisted of Neil Callahan, Marshall Brown, Harold Casanova and Harry LaVan (though Harry was not working due to his shoulder injury).³⁸

The LaVans wintered in the New Orleans area in 1923. Harry was still recovering from his shoulder injury, and had not worked for a year-and-a-half. The LaVan act continued to perform without him. The *Daily Pantagraph* reported that the LaVans would probably play parks and fairs as usual that season. They contracted for the Gentry

ROBINSON ATTRACTIONS



HIGHEST STANDARD OF EXCELLENCE

SIX FLYING LAVANS

GROUND SPACE REQUIRED—50 Ft. x 100 Ft.

Perilous and Thrilling Flights Through Space Cutaways

Twisters Pirouettes Single, Double and

..... Triple Somersaults

A DISTINGUISHED COMPANY OF AMERICAN AERIALISTS

CONSUMERS BUILDING-CHICAGO, ILL.

LaVan ad in the 1917 edition of Ethel Robinson's catalog of attractions. Pfening Archives.

Patterson Circus in 1924 and were listed in the program, as: "The LaVans, flying rings and trapeze artistes."³⁹

The activities of the Flying LaVans becomes difficult to trace during the 1920s as they continued to contract independently, playing parks and fairs, and an occasional Shrine date. In 1925 the LaVans and the Five Fearless Flyers played the St. Louis Police Circus in April. *Billboard* called both acts "the climax of courage and skill in passing and return acts."⁴⁰

Harry must have maintained contact with his former partner Tom Kitchen during this period. Kitchen continued his involvement training people at the Chicago Health Club, bringing a number of new people into the profession. Among Kitchen's students were Bob Brooks and Jerry Wilson. Harry recruited both of them for

the Flying LaVans. Brooks worked as a catcher with a number of flying acts over the years, and Wilson formed the Flying Behrs with his brother Tim catching. Wilson's act is memorable for two flyers who worked with his act at different times: Fay Alexander, who later did the aerial stunt work for *The Greatest Show on Earth* and *Trapeze*; and Clayton Moore, who was cast as the Lone Ranger in the television series of the same name in the 1950s.⁴¹

At some point in the 1920s Tom Kitchen moved to the west coast. In 1929 Robert Owen, Rellen Johnson, Don Hammond and Glen Knowles broke in with Tom at Long Beach, California. They called themselves the Flying Kitchens and performed a casting act. Three girls called the Kitchenettes also did a bicycle act. Owens and Johnson later formed a bar act called the Flying Roberts (later the Olympia Boys, and Owen and Johnson) with Owen flying and Johnson catching. They invented a collapsible stationary bar rigging and played clubs, parks and fairs. Later Owen and Johnson returned to a casting act.

At the end of the decade Harry and Amy LaVan fell victim to the severe economic conditions, and he lost his entire savings in the stock market crash. Any retirement plans they might have had were crushed, and they continued working with their aerial acts through the 1930s.⁴²

In 1930, Walt Graybeal and the Croutcher brothers, Clarence and Irwin, all just out of high school, broke in with the Flying LaVans. Walt was then seventeen years old and had already worked with George Valentine at the YMCA doing "side leaps," working to either catcher in a double-wide rigging. He had also caught double somersaults.

Graybeal stated that the dimensions of the LaVan flying act rigging was a distance of twenty-four feet between the crane bars with a drop of only six inches from the flybar to the catchbar. This was a very short drop from the flybar to the hands of the catcher compared to other acts that could be as much as twenty-four inches. A shorter drop gave the flyer much less time to complete his tricks. It was about this time, Walt stated, that men in some of flying acts began to work without body suits, bare chested.

The LaVan troupe then consisted of Clarence and Irwin Croutcher, Robert "Bones" Brown, and Graybeal. The LaVans were practicing at Bongo Park, also called Circus Park, in Bloomington (owned by Burt Doss of the Flying Thrillers).⁴³

Brown had broken in with LaVan that spring. Graybeal recalled that when Bones' mother found out that her son was practicing with the LaVan act at Circus Park, she "tore Pappy's ass out." Harry, affectionally known as "Pappy" in those days, eventually managed to convince Mrs. Brown to let Bones go out with the act. Built thin, and taller than most flyers, Bones was mainly known for comedy, and pursued a long career with a number of flying return acts. Graybeal and the Croucher brothers formed the Flying Le Claires act a few years later. The LaVans played the Steel Pier in Atlantic City that summer. The Tom Kitchen troupe performed at the annual YMCA Circus in Bloomington that year. Also in 1930, Frank

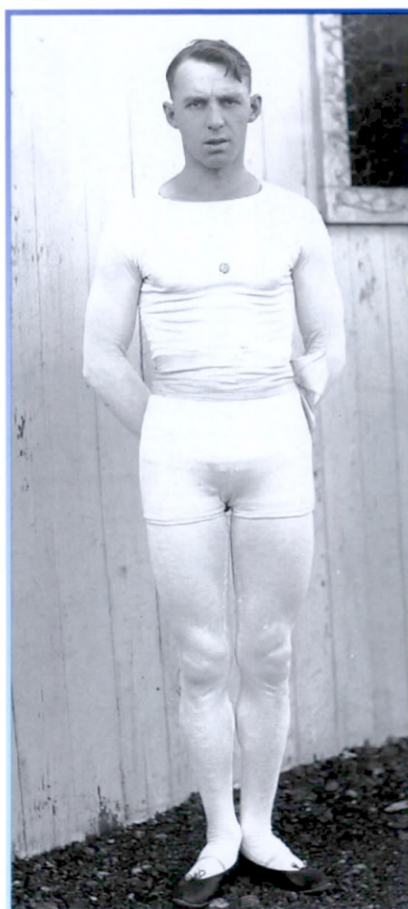
Shepherd, formerly of the LaVan act, developed his great single trapeze act while working with the Flying Flemings flying return act on the Hagenbeck Wallace Circus. Shepherd was well known for the spectacular trick of dismounting from the single trapeze with a somersault to a vertical web. He took two near-fatal falls in his career; the first in 1936 at the Des Moines Shrine Circus, the second in 1943.⁴⁴

In 1933 the Flying LaVans were with the Russell Bros. Circus, the last season they contracted with a major circus. Even at this late date, Graybeal recalled that Harry Green would wax his moustache and roll the ends in toilet paper every night. The act included

Irwin and Clarence Croutcher, Bones Brown, Walter Graybeal and Harry LaVan. At the end of the season when Harry asked Graybeal if he planned to stay with the LaVan act for the next year, Walt replied, "No, I'm going with the La Mars." Harry pulled away, leaving Walt to carry his own bags home from the train station. The memory stuck with Walt when he recalled it in 1987 as an example of how much the old time performers resented disloyalty. The Flying Kitchens performed at the Eastern States Circus that year. The Four Kitchens act consisted of stationary bars and a four person flying return act.⁴⁵

In 1935 the LaVans worked parks and fairs, and performed with the St. Louis Police Circus, where they were listed in the program as the Five Flying LaVans in Display 27. In 1937, at age sixty, Harry Green retired from aerial performance, but continued to train people. By 1940, he had retired from performance altogether, and was booking acts from his office at 2507 Canal Street in New Orleans.⁴⁶

Harry Green died March 3, 1952 in New Orleans. Pall bearers at his funeral in Bloomington were: Gene Enos, Burt Doss, George Valentine, Harry Foreman (LaMar) and Arnold Riegger.⁴⁷



Frank Shepherd about 1915. Arnold Riegger photo. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

Appendix: Definitions of Various Aerial Performances

Stationary or Horizontal Bars: A series of stationary bars, usually two or three, most often anchored to the floor by uprights. The performers swing from one bar to the next performing various tricks.

Double Trapeze: An act employing two trapezes, one mounted above the other, in which two aerialists perform a series of poses, drops, catches, iron jaw feats and/or breakaway tricks.

Flying Bar Act: A platform or pedestal board with a series of trapeze bars, on which a performer swings performing tricks from one trapeze bar to the next.

Double Flying Bar Act or Passing Act: A rigging with pedestal boards at either end, and a series of trapeze bars in between. The flyers, or leapers, swing from either end of the rigging, performing tricks and exchanging trapeze bars as they pass one another.

Casting Act: An act with a series of casters, or catchers who hang by the hocks from stationary cradles. These casters toss a flyer between themselves, and the flyer performs tricks from the hands of

one to the other.

Flying Return Act: An act in which a flyer swings off the pedestal board on a trapeze, called the flybar, turning a trick to a catcher, who hangs by the hocks head-downward from another trapeze, called the catchbar. The flyer is caught by the catcher, they swing back, and the flyer returns to the flybar, and then to the pedestal board.

This paper, as well as the article on the Flying Fishers that appeared in *Bandwagon* in 2010, is the result of twenty-seven years of research. It is dedicated to the memory of Walt Graybeal, November 13, 1913-December 27, 1994.

The author would like to thank Maureen Brunsdale and Mark Schmidt of the Special Collections Department of Milner Library, Illinois State University, for all their help with the research, writing and illustration of this article and the previous article on the Flying Fisher acts. Thanks also goes to Fred Pfening, Jr. and Fred Pfening III for their many contributions to the research and publication of this work. Thanks always to the three big Freds: Fred Pfening, Jr., Fred Pfening III and Fred Dahlinger, mainstays of the Circus Historical Society. BW

Steve Gossard, a lifelong resident of Bloomington, Illinois, is the leading authority on flying trapeze performance. He is the author of *A Reckless Era of Aerial Trapeze* as well as numerous articles on the subject.



LaVan act about 1916. Harold Casanova, left; Harry LaVan; Herb Fleming; and Frank Shepherd. Used with permission of Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

Endnotes

1. *Daily Pantagraph*, March 18, 1934; *New York Clipper*, July 6, 1878; *New York Clipper*, August 3, 1878, 151.

2. Clyde Noble, "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *White Tops*, September-October 1950, 5-6 and 12-14; "Bloomington 'Flyers' Hold World's Record," *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928, D-1; Passport application for Harry Green Tampa to Cuba, October 30, 1917.

3. *Era*, February 18, 1872, n.p.; see Steve Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance*, 51 for more about the Rizarelli Brothers; *Daily Pantagraph* July 25, 1870, August 10, 1871. The author explored the possibility of an early connection between the LaVans and a number of the other sound-alike acts.

4. *New York Clipper*, March 15, 1879, 407; April 5, 1879, 15; May 10, 1879, 55; Stuart Thayer, correspondence, January 31, 1988.

5. *New York Clipper*, January 11, 1879, 331; May 2, 1891, p. 134;

"Bloomington 'Flyers' Hold World Record," *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *New York Clipper*, February 21, 1891, 795; Clyde Noble, "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *White Tops*, September-October 1950; correspondence, Mary T. Flanagan, Curator of History, Cascade County Historical Society, December 31, 1984. Howard S. Green eventually went to Great Falls, Montana and opened a law practice. He served as Cascade County Attorney from 1905-1911, and became one of the original members of the Cascade County Bar Association. He retired in 1945, and died in December of 1950.

6. *Daily Pantagraph*, June 15, 1897; Charles Bernard, "Old Time Showmen," *Billboard* February 1, 1936, 37; *Daily Pantagraph* September 24, 1856.

7. *New York Clipper* April 16, 1881, 54-55; April 30, 1881, 98; May 28, 1881, 162; June 4, 1881, 175; 178; July 16, 1881, 274; July 23, 1881, 290; July 30, 1881, 306.

8. *New York Clipper*, supplement, April 18, 1874; September 11, 1875, 187.

9. *New York Clipper*, February 18, 1882, 790; 811; January 14, 1882, 706; 713; February 25, 1882, 811; 814; March 25, 1882, 16; April 1, 1882, 34; April 8, 1882, 50; February 18, 1882, 791; August 26, 1882, 366.

10. *New York Clipper*, January 27, 1883, 727; March 24, 1883, 6; April 9, 6; May 12, 1883, 118; May 26, 1883, 164; August 4, 1883, 328; courier, Circus World Museum; C. G. Sturtevant, "Little Biographies of Famous Circus Men," *White Tops*, March 1930.

11. Sells Brothers

Circus 1884 route book; *New York Clipper*, January 19, 1884, 749; 760; February 9, 1884, 798, March 21, 1884, 3; April 5, 1884, 38.

12. *New York Clipper* March 21, 1885, 3; Barnum and Great London Circus 1885 route book, 25; *New York Clipper*, March 28, 1885, 19; April 11, 1885, 55; April 17, 1885, 55; May 2, 1885, 104; May 30, 1885, 168.

13. *New York Clipper*, March 27, 1886, 20; Barnum Circus 1886 route book, 7; Mike Wedding, "Now You Know . . . The Flying LaVans," *The McLean County Community News*, September 9-15, 1992, 18.

14. *New York Clipper*, February 19, 1887, 772; April 16, 1887, 68; *Daily Pantagraph*, November 19, 1887; *New York Clipper*, December 10, 1887, 625.

15. *New York Clipper*, March 17, 1888, 2; April 24, 1888, 9; November 24, 1888, 588.

16. *Daily Pantagraph*, March 6, 1952, 6; March 7, 3; information

courtesy of the Bloomington Masonic Lodge; *Pantagraph*, March 18, 1934, 7; *Illinois Quest* vol. 3, 21; *Daily Pantagraph* July 22, 1928, D-1; S. H. Barrett Circus 1887 route book; Interview with Walt Graybeal, February 27, 1985.

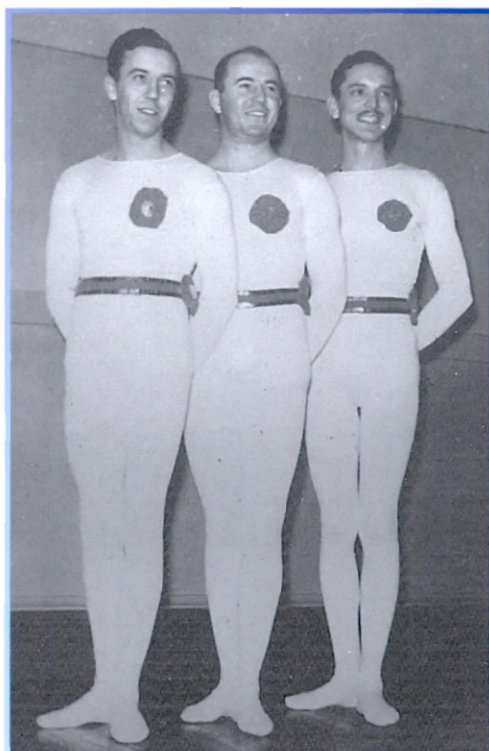
17. *New York Clipper*, March 30, 1889, 39; June 8, 1889, 207; "Bloomington 'Flyers' Hold World Record," *Daily Pantagraph* July 22, 1928, D-1; Ringling Bros. Circus 1882-1914 route book, 38-39; 50-51.

18. *New York Clipper* February 8, 1890, 791; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *New York Clipper* May 2, 1891, 134; August 2, 1885, 134; August 16, 1890, 357.

19. *New York Clipper* May 2, 1891, 134; "Bloomington 'Flyers' Hold World Record," *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928.

20. *New York Clipper*, March 19, 1892, 18; April 11, 1892, 74; Adam Forepaugh Circus 1892 courier; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *New York Clipper* September 31, 1892, 406.

21. *Billboard*, July 4, 1914, 14; *Daily Pantagraph*, June 15, 1897; *New York Clipper*, August 12, 1893, p. 361; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; Robert Hunting Circus 1893 route book, 3; 39; *New York Clipper*, January 28, 1893, 755; May 27, 1893, 182; June 10, 1893, 214; November 25, 1893, 606;



Irwin Croutcher, left, his brother Clarence Croutcher and Walt Graybeal all broke in with the LaVan flyers in 1930. Later they had their own act, the Flying LeClaires, shown here. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

November 25, 1893, 606.

22. *New York Clipper*, March 3, 1894 84; May 12, 1894, 149; September 29, 1894, 469; Robert Hunting Circus 1894 route book, 24; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *New York Clipper*, July 28, 1894, 325; October 6, 1894, 489.

23. *New York Clipper*, March 30, 1895, 55; Great Wallace Circus 1895 herald, Circus World Museum; Great Wallace Circus 1895 route book, 30, 37; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *Bloomington City Directory*, 1891; *New York Clipper*, June 15, 1895, 227, 239; June 22, 1895, 252; *Daily Pantagraph*, June 15, 1897; *New York Clipper*, July 27, 1895, 326; August 3, 1895, 339; August 10, 1895, 355; August 17, 1895, 371; August 24, 1895, 386; August 31, 1895, 403; September 7, 1895, 423; September 14, 1895, 435; September 28, 1895, 469.

24. *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, March 18, 1946; letterhead for LaVan and Weitzel courtesy of Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *New York Clipper*, February 15, 1896, 745, 793; June 6, 1896, 212; *Daily Pantagraph*, June 15, 1897; July 22, 1928; June 15, 1897; *New York Clipper*, October 17, 1896, 531; December 26, 1896, 689.

25. *New York Clipper*, January 23, 1897,



LaVans performing at Luna Park, Coney Island about 1920. Used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

74; January 30, 1897, 768; February 6, 1897, 781; *Daily Pantagraph*, June 15, 1897; June 26, 1897; July 22, 1928.

26. *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; correspondence with Rellen Owen October 10, 1999.

27. John Robinson 1899 route book, 13; Great Wallace Circus herald, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Billboard*, September 9, 1933, 30.

28. John Robinson Circus 1900 program; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; John Robinson Circus 1900 route book, 33; John Robinson Circus 1901 route book, 126; Campbell Bros. Circus 1905 route book.

29. Barnum and Bailey 1903 route book 89; Chang Reynolds, "The Greater Norris and Rowe Circus, Part I," *Bandwagon*, January-February 1972, 4-14; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; Campbell Bros. 1905 route book, 6.

30. *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *Billboard* April 14, 1906, 32; May 5, 1906, 24; *New York Clipper* July 17, 1906, 531; *Daily Pantagraph* January 6, 1907; *Billboard* March 30, 1907, 30; May 4, 1907, 22; January 5, 1935.

31. Barnum and Bailey 1908 program; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *Billboard*, March 21, 1908, 26.

32. *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928.

33. *Billboard* April 15, 1911, 6; October 19, 1912, 277; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; Letters dated August 11, August 17, and October 13, 1914 from the Ringling Brothers to Harry LaVan, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Billboard*, March 6, 1915, 23; photos identified from the Arnold Riegger Collection, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

34. Passport applications for Arnold Riegger and Harry LaVan dated October 30, 1917; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928; *Morning World*, December 3, 1961, 1; *Billboard*, May 20, 1916, 23; January 19, 1918, 28; *Daily Bulletin*, March 9, 1917, 7; Passport application for Arnold Riegger November 7, 1917.

35. Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections, black scrapbook.

36. Correspondence courtesy of Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University.

37. Advertisement courtesy of Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University.

38. Howe's Great London 1921 route book; *Daily Pantagraph*, April 2, 1921, 5; March 23, 1923, 11; captioned photograph, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

39. *Daily Pantagraph*, March 22, 1923, 11; *Billboard*, June 14, 1924, 69.

40. *Billboard*, April 20, 1925, 107; *Daily Pantagraph*, July 22, 1928.

41. Interview with Walt Graybeal June 24, 1987.

42. Correspondence with Rellen Owen October 8, 1999; Interview with Walt Graybeal August 1, 1991.

43. Interview with Walt Graybeal, June 18, 1991.

44. Interviews with Walt Graybeal February 28, 1985; June

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ABSOLUTE MASTERS OF THE FLYING TRAPEZE

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My dear Sir
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Circus - two separate quadruped acts
The very best 4 men flying trapeze act -
Only passing flying trapeze act in
America. Capable from both ends of rigging
passing and nonpassing & changing traps
laterally. Somersault side side from trap to
trap - Riggings 52 feet in length -
2/ a 3 man Hardy North Roman Ruins act stage
Hurnish Riggings both acts 5 men traps
Hope to receive your early reply
Remain your very truly
Harry V. G. LaVan
#224 N Randolph St
Chgo. M. E. C.
New Orleans
La

November 25, 1925 letter from Harry LaVan to T. E. "Eddie" Stinson, Circus Chairman of the Detroit Shrine Temple, trying to place his acts in the 1926 circus. Note that LaVan called himself "H. V. Green LaVan," combining his birth name with his ring name. Pfening Archives.

24, 1987; *Daily Pantagraph*, June 7, 1931, 12; Photograph on file, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Daily Pantagraph*, March 22, 1931, 3-A; *Billboard*, June 28, 1930, 70; July 5, 1930, 54; February 24, 1936, 38; March 7, 1936, 34; December 30, 1939, 97; October 2, 1943, 40; December 11, 1943, 38; June 30, 1945, 49; interview with Jackie Le Claire April 13, 2000.

45. Captioned photo, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; Graybeal, February 28, 1985; *Wisconsin State Journal* October 25, 1933; Braathen scrapbook, Milner Library, Illinois State University; *Billboard*, September 9, 1933, 30; Graybeal, June 24, 1987.

46. *Billboard*, April 20, 1935, 38; May 11, 37; ad for Bee Kyle, high diver, booking agents W. B. Becker, of St. Louis; and H. V. LaVan, of 2507 Canal St., New Orleans, unknown source, on file, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

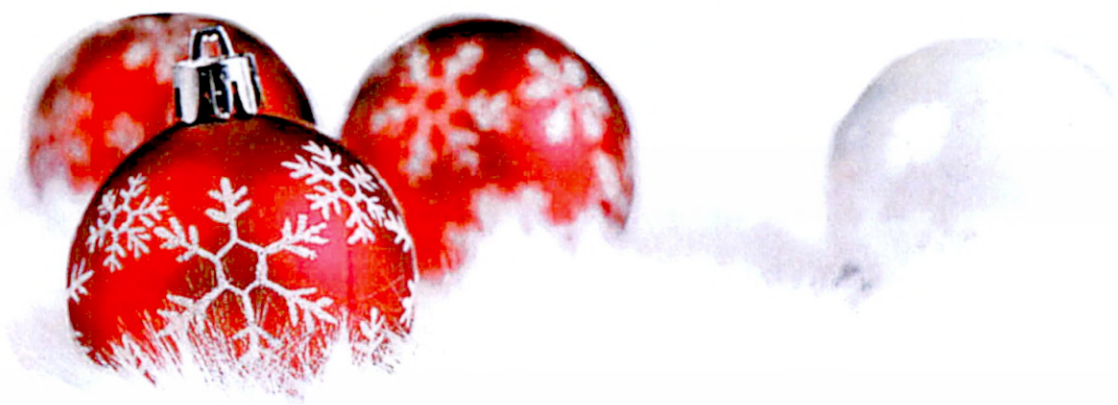
47. Information courtesy of the Bloomington Masonic Lodge; *Daily Pantagraph*, March 6, 1952, 6; March 7, 1952, 3.



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Your friends at the
Circus Hall of Fame
Peru, Indiana
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Professor Risley and the Imperial Japanese Troupe Come to America

by Frederik L. Schodt

Professor Risley was the stage name of Richard Risley Carlisle, an extraordinary acrobat and impresario. Born near the coast of New Jersey in 1814, Risley died in a lunatic asylum in Philadelphia in 1874. Stuart Thayer has referred to him as a "man in motion," for in the space of sixty years he traveled far more, and did far more, than most ordinary mortals. In the 1840s, Risley was a household name in both America and Europe, known for what was called the Risley Act that consisted of juggling his two children with his feet. Yet Risley was more than an ordinary acrobat, for he also managed to create a new type of "drawing room entertainment"—one that straddled the line between traditional circus acts and ballet and could be enjoyed by members of all classes. Risley's performances were viewed by crowds that numbered in the thousands, including peasants and royalty, and the phrase "à la Risley" came to mean someone of extraordinary agility and class and grace.

In the wake of the 1849 California Gold Rush, many East Coast performers migrated west, hoping to strike it rich. Risley arrived in San Francisco in 1855, and performed in Northern California and on up into Oregon, but his timing was off, for the boom was over and there was too much competition. In 1857, after gold was discovered in Australia, he sailed for the southern hemisphere and spent nearly two years performing there, usually with a young protégé named Charles and a contortionist named D'Evani. But again, his timing was off. In 1860, Risley became a full-time impresario. He took a full circus to Calcutta and began pioneering the newly opened Asian circuit. He appeared in Singapore, Batavia (today's Jakarta), Hong Kong, Bangkok, Manila, and Shanghai. In the spring of 1864, he arrived with his circus in the foreign settlement of Yokohama, in still-feudal Japan. Apparently unaware that non-Japanese were still prohibited from travelling beyond the confines of the town, his performers deserted him and he became effectively stranded.

At the end of 1866, Risley embarked on what was perhaps his most audacious adventure, putting together a group of eighteen of the best Japanese acrobats, calling them the Imperial Japanese Troupe.



Maguire's Academy of Music, Pine Street, between Montgomery and Sansome. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Aiming to showcase them at the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, he obtained Japan's first civilian passports for them, and took them to San Francisco, the major cities of the East Coast, London, Paris, and many other capitals of Europe. In the process, Risley helped kick off a boom in Japanese performers that lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century. And like Risley himself, this boom in Japanese acts became part of a type of lost history, largely forgotten except among circus and performing arts historians. By re-examining the life of Risley and his Imperial Japanese Troupe, we can see how these intrepid entertainers of the mid-nineteenth century were in the vanguard of globalization and early popular culture interchanges.

The following is an excerpt from Frederik L. Schodt's new book, *Professor Risley and the Imperial Japanese Troupe: How an American Acrobat Introduced Circus to Japan—And Japan to the West*, published by Stone Bridge Press of Berkeley, California.

View of San Francisco and its waterfront, from Vallejo and Battery, circa 1867. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



On New Year's Eve, 1866, Professor Risley and the Imperial Japanese Troupe finally arrived in San Francisco harbor on the British sailing bark, *Archibald*. A nearby Sacramento newspaper reported that it was a record crossing of the Pacific, lasting only nineteen days, and that the captain got so drunk in a disreputable bar after his victory that he was imprisoned and then ejected in the morning, "minus his money, watch, jewelry, and everything but his undershirt and drawers." Some less generous San Francisco newspapers put the crossing at twenty-five days. . . .¹

The *Archibald* docked on the evening of what had been a fine sunny day, but the voyage had hardly been pleasant. For Japanese, who had not been allowed beyond their immediate coastal waters for over two centuries (and who had been raised to believe that they might be executed if caught leaving the homeland) it was terrifying. They of course immediately experienced the then-usual bouts of violent sea sickness when they sailed through heavy swells and sleet. On December 13, a dog on the trip began biting people, so the American interpreter on board, Edward Banks, shot and threw it overboard. There is no mention of what Risley thought of this, but he must have been heart-broken, because he loved animals. In the first part of the journey, the ship sailed through huge westerly gales and rocked violently, the passengers sometimes unable to stand. The sails were torn, and one of the masts, another troupe member would later recall, was struck by lightning and had to be repaired. The Japanese feared they were doomed, but they were reassured by seeing that the captain was unfazed, and that the ship was well made.²

On arrival in San Francisco, Takano Hirohachi mentions that three "foreigners" went ashore and the troupe stayed on board. Throughout his diary, Hirohachi never mentions Risley by name, instead occasionally alluding to him with the now archaic word, *ijin*, or "foreigner."³ Most of his interactions were probably with the interpreter Banks, who was a former U.S. marshal in Yokohama and himself an investor in the troupe. Banks is an intriguing character about who little is known, but in those days there were almost no Europeans capable of speaking Japanese, let alone interpreting, so he possessed a rare talent. In Hirohachi's diary Banks is referred to as *henkutsu*, and it was only after many years Japanese researchers established his identity. The third person in the group to which Hirohachi refers was William F. Schiedt, who is listed under "Passengers" in the January 1 edition of the *Alta*, along with Risley, Banks, and "eighteen Japanese jugglers." Like Banks, he was an investor in the group, and in charge of managing the finances, and he too may have known some Japanese and acted as an interpreter. We know from his 1867 U.S. passport application that he was remarkably young, only twenty-eight, and that he was 5'8" tall, with a high forehead, blue eyes, prominent nose, round chin, light brown hair, fair complexion, long oval face, and tattoos on both arms and chest, including one of the "American Shield." There may also have been a fourth "foreigner" with the group, for a quarter of a century later one troupe member would recall that a Chinese lad named "Lee" served as Risley's personal interpreter and helper. He reportedly

spoke wretched Japanese, and his name never appears in Hirohachi's diaries, or any surviving reports of the time.⁴

Risley had some serious negotiations to do in San Francisco before his Imperial troupe and all their accompanying stage paraphernalia could be properly landed. They had arrived nearly a month later than planned, and while at sea there had been no way to communicate with San Francisco. There was first and foremost the basic logistical problem of where to lodge the troupe, and where and how to put on the long-delayed show that had already been advertised in the local papers since November. And it was surely a crushing blow to learn that a competing troupe had already stolen much of their planned thunder. Making matters more complicated for Risley was the fact that he had been out of the country for nearly ten years.

From recent research, we now know that the first troupe of Japanese who arrived in the United States was comprised of the Tetsuwari family of performers. Risley's "Imperials," on the other hand, was an amalgam of eighteen members from primarily three performing families—the Hamaikari, Sumidagawa, and Matsui families of jugglers and acrobats—presumably selected by Hirohachi and Banks for Risley. For reasons impossible to say today, the Imperials were often advertised and described as having twenty members, instead of eighteen. Although only Risley's group would make it, both companies were headed for the Exposition Universelle, which was held by Emperor Napoleon III in Paris in 1867. One of the first true world fairs, this exposition attracted great attention from entertainers around the globe, and entrepreneurial foreigners in Yokohama saw it as the perfect opportunity to exploit curiosity in Japan, showcase the unique talents of Japanese performing artists, and make a galumphing fortune. At least five Japanese troupes left Japan around this time, some traveling west and some—like the Imperials and the Tetsuwari faction—traveling east. Some made it to the Europe but not the Exposition, and some stayed in the United States, but it meant that nearly everywhere the Imperials went, they faced competition from fellow

countrymen.

The departure of Risley's Imperials from Yokohama had been delayed for many reasons. First, the members were all lucky to leave with their lives, because Yokohama had erupted in flames on November 26 and most of the settlement, including the American consulate, had been destroyed. Even Edward Banks, the interpreter, lost a valuable collection of Japanese curiosities, which he had been years in accumulating. Second, their departure was also delayed because Risley went to the trouble of applying for passports from the Japanese government while the other groups apparently did not bother. The Japanese government was still a feudal one—soon to collapse in a semi-revolution and be replaced by a modern system—so in 1866 considerable bureaucratic confusion was the norm. One result of Risley's efforts, however, was that Sumidagawa Namigorô, a prominent troupe member in the Imperials, received the first passport ever issued by the Japanese government to an ordinary

MAGUIRE'S ACADEMY OF MUSIC
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T. MAGUIRE.....Sole Proprietor and Manager

**THE IMPERIAL
JAPANESE PERFORMERS!**
(20 IN NUMBER.)
WILL APPEAR
....IN THEIR....
Unapproachable Performances,
AT THE ABOVE THEATRE,
On Monday Evening, January 7, 1867.

PRICES OF ADMISSION:
Dress Circle and Orchestra Seats.....\$1.00
Family Circle.....20 Cents / Gallery.....25 Cents
No Extra Charge for Reserved Seats
D.o.s open at 7; to commence at 8 o'clock. Ja3

Announcement for the Imperials at Maguire's Academy of Music. From San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, January 3, 1868

citizen.⁵

Risley wasted no time on arrival in generating publicity and in setting up performances. On January 1 and 2, he arranged mentions in the *Alta* proclaiming the superiority of his troupe "over all other of their profession, either in or outside the Empire of the Tycoon."⁶ And in multiple local papers he also arranged for detailed, official announcements of upcoming performances, which hinted at some of the reasons for his delay: "Months after the contract was made with these artists to proceed to foreign countries on a professional trip, the Japanese

Government finally issued the passports and necessary permits for them to depart from their native country, when it was made known to the Government that Mr. Edward Banks, late U.S. Marshal at Kanagawa, Japan, after his resignation of office, after his sojourn of seven years in the country, was to accompany the artists on their professional trip, to secure their safe return to their native country, the difficulties and obstacles were all the greater, as the applications demanded passports for female artists to depart from Japan, which was entirely new to the Japanese government."⁷

The local correspondent for the *New York Times* later elaborated on Risley's situation. After describing how the newspapers had all advertised Risley's coming and how a ship with different Japanese performers had actually arrived in San Francisco earlier in December, he wrote: "But behold! Another vessel came in a few days since, bringing the original Jacobs, and we discovered that we had been sold.

Some smart Yankee, taking advantage of the idea originated by RISLEY, had gathered a company together, slipped off in advance, and had had a 'run' and the advantage of all RISLEY'S prestige and advertising. Discovering this, RISLEY determined to open for three nights only. . . ."⁸

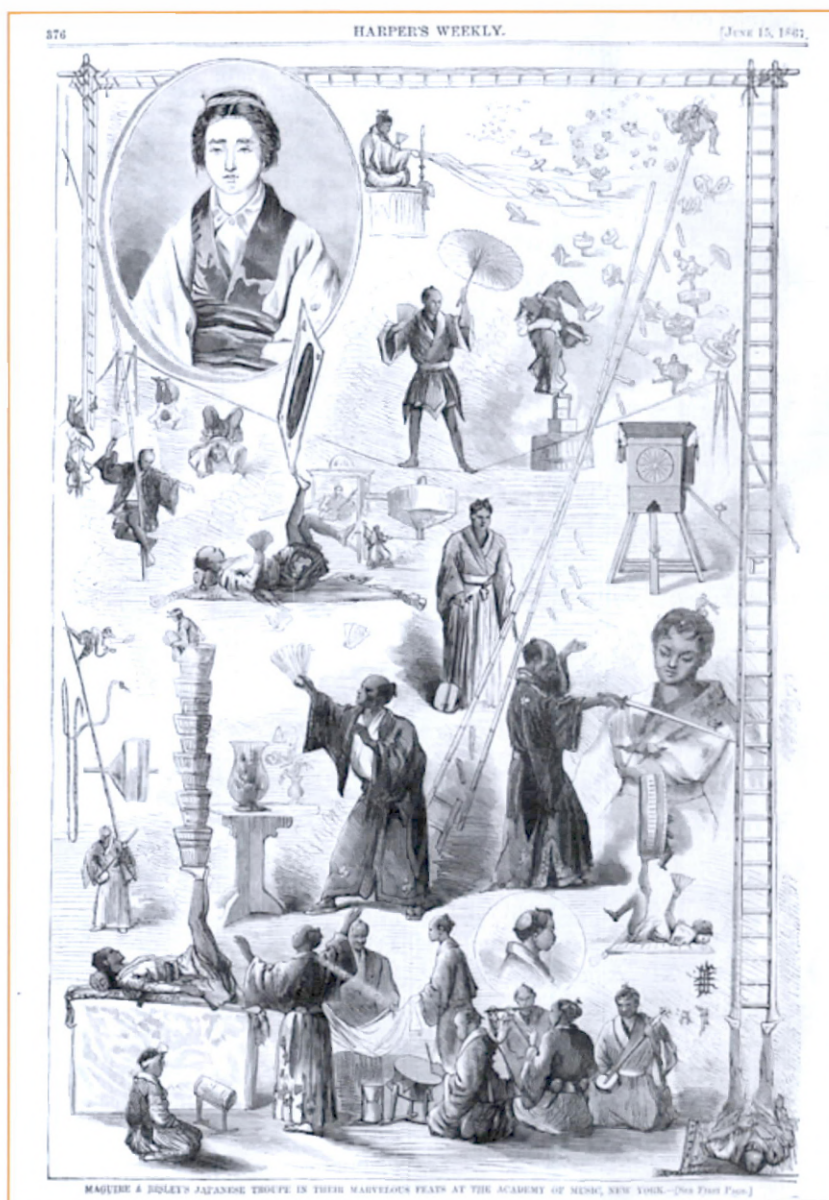
Up against a professional like Risley, the other troupe—the Tetsuwari family—never really had a chance, even if equally skilled. With his competitors out of town, in Sacramento, Risley quickly made arrangements with Thomas Maguire for his group to appear at Maguire's Academy of Music on January 7. As another paper

put it, "Tis whispered in the house, and muttered on the street, that they are wonderful fellows; that it is a good thing for the other company that Smith took them to Sacramento. Had they seen Risley's performers in some of their feats, they certainly would have committed, out of pure envy, the *hari kari*, on the spot."⁹

The Imperials left their ship on January 1, after Risley had procured lodging for them. And Risley knew how to show his troupe off, for according to Hirohachi they traveled through crowds of spectators to their hotel in five horse-drawn carriages decorated with gold and silver inlay, "a sight that even a daimyo in Japan would have a hard time matching."¹⁰ Hirohachi's simple words, referring to a Japanese feudal lord, hid the scale of his true sentiments as a commoner in Japan's feudal system, for back home he could have had his head lopped off for the slightest offense by nearly any member of the samurai class.

For the Japanese performers, who had never set foot abroad or been surrounded by different races of people, San Francisco was a dizzying experience. They normally ate fish but never the meat of four-legged animals. They had rarely seen wheeled vehicles or even large mirrors or so many houses with glass windows. Nor had they any familiarity with the modern scientific advances of mid-nineteenth-century America or Europe. During their stay in San Francisco, when not resting, checking their equipment or performing or rehearsing, they would see much of the city. They rode in carriages through the sand dunes of western San Francisco to Cliff

House and Seal Rock, and marvel at California sea lions. They visited the United States Mint in San Francisco (where Bret Harte then worked), and saw huge piles of gold coins being minted. They visited the Olympic Club and observed American gymnasts at work. They were enchanted with photographs, and had theirs taken at the studio of the pioneering portraitists, Bradley & Rulofson, to use as promotional calling cards known as *carte de visite* (those by Bradley & Rulofson are lost, but others, and from other cities, survive). They marveled at cobblestone roads and buildings as tall



"Maguire and Risley's Japanese Troupe in their marvelous feats at the Academy of Music, New York." From Harper's Weekly, June 15, 1867.

as five and seven stories high, and were astounded at the sight of a steam train. In their hotel, they were amazed by faucets and drains, and even more so with gas lights in the room. They were sternly warned to be careful with the latter, since gas-related explosions and conflagrations were then frighteningly common (as they would later discover). But there was humor, too. As the group's magician/juggler, Sumidagawa Namigoro, recalled years later, when served rice on flat plates with knives and forks they did not know how to go about eating, so they put the rice in a chamber pot they found, only to be told that it was for urinating at night.

On January 7, the Imperials finally opened at Maguire's Academy of Music for what

was billed as a limited, three-day run. It was a huge success and made the performances of the previous troupe, the Tetsuwari family, look quite tame. But the Imperials were aided by a spike in interest in Japan that occurred in the city; that same week the first regular steamship line between San Francisco and Japan had been inaugurated with much fanfare in the media. And the Imperials also had the professional production and choreography of Professor Risley. Indeed, they had more of everything. As the *Alta* noted right before they

juggler doing a lantern trick. One other woman accompanied the performances by playing the Japanese samisen, with its percussive and, to Americans, grating sound. It gave reporters another reason to rank the Imperials over the Tetsuwari troupe. "This troupe, by the way," wrote one, "give very little of their own style of music, and that little is quite sufficient for the untutored ears of San Franciscans."¹²

Another huge hit of the show was a young boy acrobat named Umekichi. Usually described in Western press as the son of the troupe's elder, Hamaikari Sadakichi, he was really the man's nephew. But his panache and charisma would eventually win all of America's hearts. Because he also finished his spectacular stunts

with a fractured English "You bet!" and "All right!" he would also become known as "Little All Right." He was regarded as superior in every way to Tommy of the rival Tetsuwari Company, except perhaps in his daring, but he more than made up for that with charm and skill. The local correspondent from the *New York Times* later wrote his audience back home what to expect: "The ladies will faint and the men go crazy over a juvenile performer whom we have called 'All-right.' The people [here] have a custom of testifying their appreciation of a performer in a substantial manner—throwing money upon the stage. After the termination last night of little 'All Right's' perilous ladder feat, the audience nearly covered the stage with half dollars, five, ten and twenty-dollar gold pieces, at which the cunning little juvenile shouted, 'All right you bet!' and down came another shower of gold and silver! 'You bet' is the most popular and fashionable vulgar ejaculation here I have ever heard. Everybody uses it, and all travelers have reported it. . . ."¹³



Namigorô does the butterfly trick. From *Le Monde Illustré*, November 23, 1867.



The Imperials at work in London. From *The Mask*, February-December, 1868.

opened, "They are said to excel the first troupe in the variety of their feats—besides having more ladders, more tubs, more bamboo poles, more juvenile prodigies, and more female rope-walkers." The females alone might have been enough to draw a crowd, but it was a jammed and suffocating house, so much so that, as Hirohachi marveled in his diary, the doors had to be shut to prevent any more people from entering.¹¹

The curtain at the Academy rose to reveal all "twenty" members of the troupe, including two adult females, a little girl, and three boys, all salaaming deeply in Japanese style to the audience. The show unfolded with astonishing exhibitions of flexibility and balance, spinning of tops on the edge of a sword, and the female



As had been true in Washington, D. C. for Professor Risley and the Imperial Japanese Troupe, there was no lack of competition in New York in May. There was P. T. Barnum's museum and menagerie, and there were operas, minstrel shows, plays, panoramas, and even the New York Circus. But this time the Imperials had finally secured one of the city's more coveted venues—the newly renovated and huge local Academy of Music, on 14th and Irving. And now Risley was also able to advertise in local papers that the Imperials had



The "Transformation Fox Scene," as performed in London's Lyceum theatre. From *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, May 9, 1868.

been declared "The Wonder of the World" based on their reception not only in San Francisco, but also Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. In Washington, he could proclaim, they had created "A Perfect Furore" and "been witnessed with marked demonstrations of approbation and delight by the President and family, Gen. Grant, the foreign Ministers, heads of Departments and overwhelming audiences."¹⁴

When the Imperials debuted on May 6, they did not disappoint. As a *New York Times* reviewer put it the next day: "People came here with great expectations, predicated upon wonderful reports that had come to them from San Francisco and other places that had witnessed the marvelous works of the Imperial Japanese Troupe, whom Prof. Risley has kindly persuaded to tarry with us for a few weeks en route to the Paris Exhibition; but we risk nothing in asserting that of all that vast assemblage (there must have been at least 3,000 persons in the house,) if there was one individual who went away unwilling to confess that the promises made in the small bills were not more than redeemed, he ought to emigrate from this to some other sphere, where, possibly, there is something left to astonish him."¹⁵

The Imperials had a nearly a two month run in New York, where they were sold out nearly every night and crowds had to be turned away. In the process they became a national phenomenon in a still young and recently divided nation. But what sort of acts did the Japanese introduce that so drove the American's wild? The *New York Post* ran one of the best summaries of the performances at the Academy, with a long article titled "An Evening with the Jugglers." It declared the Japanese "wonderful," and said that the show had lasted two and a half hours, with a succession of acrobatic and gymnastic feats "which defied the laws of gravity and made every spectator catch his breath." When the curtain rose, twenty Japanese men, women and children "simultaneously knocked their heads against the floor," in bows of respect. A short oration, in Japanese, was then delivered by the master of ceremonies, "but not generally understood."

First three children came out and engaged in contortions and acrobatics, with panache and humor. Then the head of the troupe, Hamaikari Sadakichi, lying on his back, juggled his son, Umekichi, otherwise known as All Right, with his feet in a Japanese version of the Risley Act, except that a series of up to twelve wooden tubs were gradually inserted between Sadakichi and All Right, stacking up gradually, and eventually revolving while All Right kept his footing on the precarious stack, shouting All Right and grinning with delight. Then the tubs were pulled away and All Right did a pin-point landing on his father's upturned feet.

The tub balancing was followed by top-spinning, performed by Matsui Kikujirō and his daughter. They threw tops into the air, jerked them down, made them travel up inclines, into miniature pagodas, spin around and come out, then spun them on a man's shoulder and back and arms, threw them twenty feet into the air and caught them on a samurai sword blade where they spun back and forth. If a top fell off, Matsui "abased himself before the people, and rose from his knees to do still more wonderful things."

Following the top-spinning was the famous butterfly trick, usually performed by Sumidagawa Namigorō, but in this case by his son, Matsugorō, who made paper butterflies and launched them into the air with his fan. "A bouquet of flowers held in the hand of one of the performers attracts the butterfly; presently other butterflies appear, and soon a swarm hovers around the nosegay. This trick is simple, but very graceful and beautiful."

Then two women appeared, a juggler and a musician, accompanied by a drummer, and they performed some magic tricks, including pulling a huge amount of silk ribbon from a lacquer box; when lit, "it exploded like a piece of fireworks and changed into a huge Japanese umbrella, gorgeously colored."

Later in the evening, the acts included Little All Right performing at the end of a twenty-foot long bamboo pole, supported vertically on the shoulder of his father, posing and shouting his "All right, you bet!" while the other Japanese performers below chimed in with *kakegoe*, or yells of encouragement. The highlight of the evening was the death-defying "ladder trick," in which one adult performer, lying on the ground, with his feet balanced a huge ladder, to which a smaller ladder was attached at a right angle. All Right scrambled up



Hamaikari Denkichi (lying) and Umekichi (flying) perform the tub trick at the Lyceum, in front of fanciful Japanese background scenes painted by Grieves & Son. From *Illustrated London News*, May 2, 1868.

to the top, posed and performed, and then sprang up a rope to the roof of the building. A tightrope and a pulley then allowed him to zoom down to the floor at high speed, where he was caught by two adult performers and dramatically announced "All Right!" again. As the *New York Post* reporter commented, "The perfect grace of these performers is noteworthy. All they do is to destroy our faith in the laws of nature by the calm performance of feats apparently impossible."¹⁶

Even after watching a show, exactly how the Japanese were able to accomplish their feats remained a mystery to many. "Everybody who goes to see Prof. Risley's Japanese is puzzled to know how those dusky jugglers do their 'tricks,'" wrote the *New York Evening Express*, which then proceeded to quote a letter from a humorous but anonymous correspondent who claimed to have uncovered the "secret." Since the Japanese were always nonchalantly fanning themselves during the most difficult and dangerous acts, this man surmised, the secret obviously lay in the fans themselves, and that if he could have "a fan and perhaps a pair of Japan-knees, I could perform all the tricks they do."¹⁷

In the mid-nineteenth century, photographs were not yet widely used in the media, and cameras were not yet capable of capturing movement well. As a result, there are only a few visual images of what the Imperials' performance might have looked like. One of the best was a full page lithograph illustration that appeared along with a long article in *Harper's Weekly*. One of the most popular illustrated magazines in the United States at the time, Harper's help seal the Imperial's national fame, for it detailed not only each of the individual acts in a type of creative montage, but also showed the paraphernalia used, and the more cultural aspects of kimono-clad women and exotic musicians. In an accompanying article, the reviewer had nothing but glowing praise for the troupe's performances, adding that they "reveal to us a phase of the interior life of Japan which can not be otherwise gained in this country, and which no one should miss seeing."¹⁸

With their shows in New York, the Japanese were showered with praise both direct and indirect. The famous preacher Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, a man not normally thought of as a circus or drama fan, saw them at the Academy and incorporated laudatory references to their remarkable athleticism in his sermons that week. In the ultimate tribute, some local entertainers staged burlesque acts, parodying the Japanese, just as they had in other American cities (later, one such show would be titled "Hernandez Jap-on Knees"). On May 17, author and humorist Mark Twain was in town, and he wrote about the Japanese. He had a considerable following of his own as a lecturer, but the Japanese were stealing his crowd. Twain wrote: "[The] Japanese jugglers have taken New York by storm. . . . It has to be a colossal sensation that is able to set every

body talking in New York, but the Japs did it. And I got precious tired of it for the first few days. No matter where I went, they were the first subject mentioned; if I stopped a moment in a hotel, I heard people talking about them; if I lunched in a Dutch restaurant, there was one constantly recurring phrase which I understood, and only one, 'das Japs,' in French restaurants, it was 'les Jap,' in Irish restaurants, it was 'thim Japans,' after church the sermon was discussed five minutes, and then the Japs for half an hour. . . . The Japs are a prodigious success."¹⁹



"The Children have been to see the Japanese." From Harper's Weekly, June 15, 1867.

Success brought excitement, and opened up new worlds for the Japanese. There were jaunts outside Manhattan in flag-flying carriages to perform in Brooklyn and Newark, New Jersey, and even a train trip up north to Boston, where the Imperials had another short but spectacularly successful run. For performers who were of low social status back home, fame opened new doors. In early June, the second official Japanese government mission to the United States happened to be in New York at the same time as the Imperials were performing, and three samurai came to see their show. They delighted in talking with their fellow countrymen so much that the next day they invited Hirohachi and others to their hotel and treated them to a meal. Remarkably, Hirohachi, the Imperials' diarist and overseer, was even able to ask the samurai to take some letters back to

Japan for him. It was a type of familiarity that would have been unthinkable back in Japan, and an interaction made more poignant today because we now know that one of the young samurai, along on the mission as a translator, was none other than Fukuzawa Yukichi, who later became a famous intellectual and philosopher. Known today as one of the founders of modern Japan, at the time of this writing his countenance still graced most ten thousand yen notes. But Fukuzawa wasn't the only exalted visitor the Imperials met. In Boston, Hirohachi notes in his journal, they again ran into the "Washington King," President Andrew Johnson. He was in town for a rare presidential visit, having been invited by the local Masons, and as Hirohachi described it in his journal, he spotted them when passing before about "ten thousand people," and "put his fingers to his mouth," apparently blowing them a kiss. They were sad to part with him.²⁰

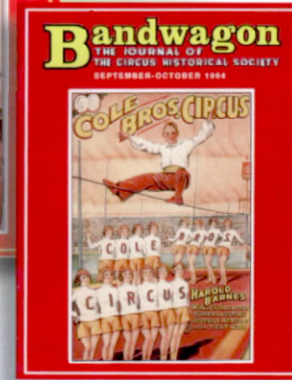
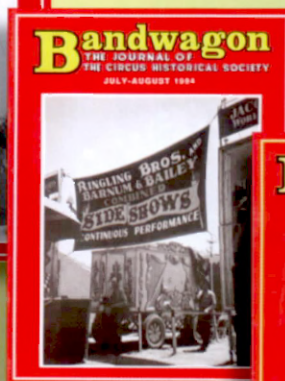
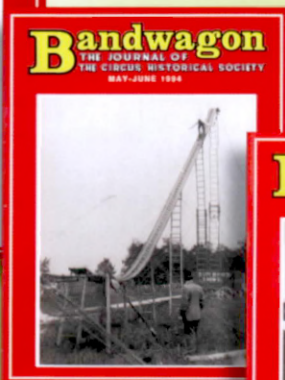
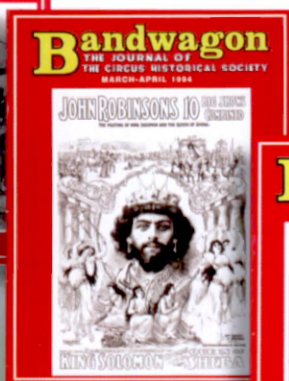
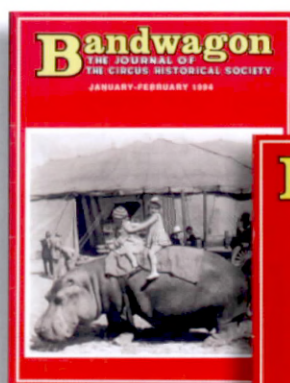
The Imperials had become media celebrities in the United States. They were idolized by Americans and, as Mark Twain noted, referred to in conversation regularly. Children across the land delighted in imitating the washtub and other tricks of the Japanese. Much as "Risley" had become a household word twenty years earlier, so, too, did little "All Right." There were poems written about him. The blind composer, Edward Mack, wrote the "All Right Polka," which was "respectfully dedicated to Hamai Kari Sadakitchi" and copyrighted. A Massachusetts firearms manufacture later

created the "smallest and most perfect revolver in the world" and of course called it the "Little All Right." There were even matchboxes and cigar boxes with his image and name on the cover. In 1867, in faraway Fort Riley, Kansas, on the Western frontier, nearly ten years before he met his inglorious and bloody end at the Battle of Little Big Horn, General Custer went riding with his wife, Elizabeth, and she awkwardly fell off her horse, exclaiming "All Right!" As Elizabeth later described in her book, *Tenting on the Plains*, the cavalry soldiers accompanying them delighted in mercilessly ribbing her: "They brought little All Right, the then famous Japanese acrobat, into every conversation. . . ." ²¹ BW

Frederik L. Schodt is a writer, translator, and conference interpreter who lives in the San Francisco Bay area. He has written many books on the confluence of Japanese and American cultures, especially on history and popular culture. In 2009, he was awarded Japan's Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette for his work.

Endnotes

1. "By Telegraph to the Union," *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 4, 1867, "Shipping Intelligence," *Daily Alta California*, January 1, 1867.
2. Iinomachi, *Iino chōshi*. Vol. 3 (2): pp. 36-37; Shigeatsu Hayashi, "Nakagawa Namigorō oji no danwa" [A chat with old man Nakagawa Namigorō], *Sokki ihō*, Vol. 49, February 15, 1893, pp. 40-44.
3. Iinomachi, *Iino chōshi*. Vol. 3 (2): p. 10. Mihara has also suggested that because of his strong Northeastern dialect, to Hirohachi the word "Risley" may also have sounded somewhat like "ijin."
4. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington D.C.; Passport Applications, 1795-1905; ARC Identifier 566612/MLR Number A1 508; NARA Series: M1372; Roll #148.; Shigeatsu Hayashi, "Nakagawa Namigorō oji no danwa" [A chat with old man Nakagawa Namigorō], *Sokki ihō*, Vol. 52, May 30, 1893, pp.138-41.
5. "The Alta California, January 3, 1867; *The Daily Japan Herald*, 28 November 1866; Hajime Miyoshi, *Nippon saakasu monogatari: umi o koeta karuwaza kyokugeishitachi* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1993). pp. 25-27.
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15. "Amusements: Academy of Music—The Japanese Jugglers," *New York Times*, May 7, 1867.
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17. "The Drama," *New York Evening Express*, May 25 1867.
18. "The Japanese Jugglers," *Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization*, June 15 1867, p.1.
19. "Letter from 'Mark Twain' " No. 17 (May 17, 1867), *The Daily Alta California*, June 16, 1867.
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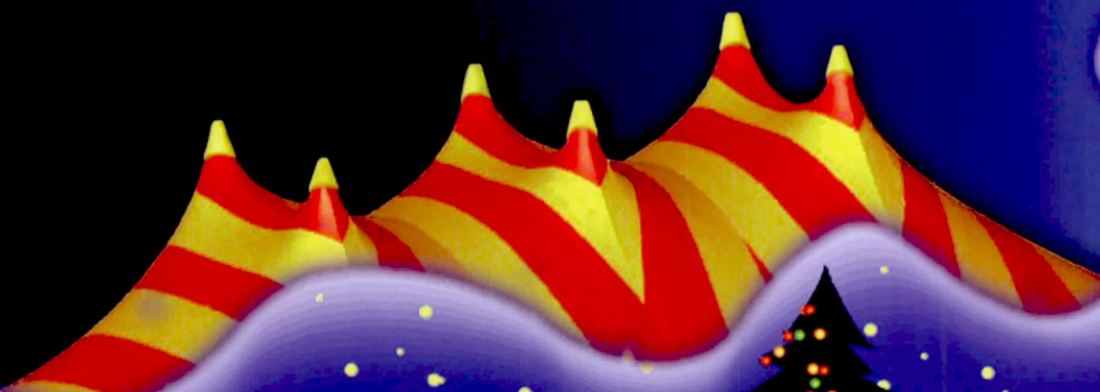


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